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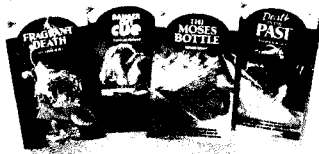
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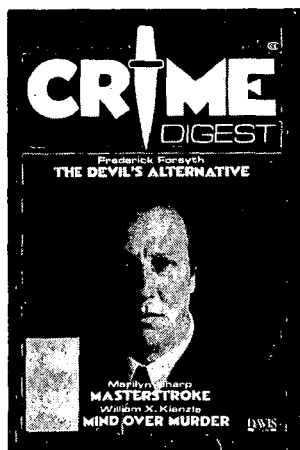
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 26, No. 13, Dec. 9, 1981. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., at \$1.25 a copy. Annual subscription \$16.25 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$18.50 elsewhere. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 1932, Marion, O. 43305. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. © 1981 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine

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December 9, 1981



Dear Reader:

"I'm not scared of dead folks. It's the livin' ones you got to watch," says the young nursing-home worker in "Diamonds in the Rough."

"He looks like a treacherous old Borgia, right enough," comments one business colleague to another about a third in "Luncheon at Quills."

"You wouldn't pass off to a teammate unless the basket was in another time zone," accuses a basketball star's alter-ego in "You and Me."

"I'm concerned about the curious behavior of the elephants in the nighttime," ponders the great G.K. Chesterton in "The Bad Samaritan."

Four quotes from this new issue—from but one-third of the thirteen entertaining new stories chosen just for you.

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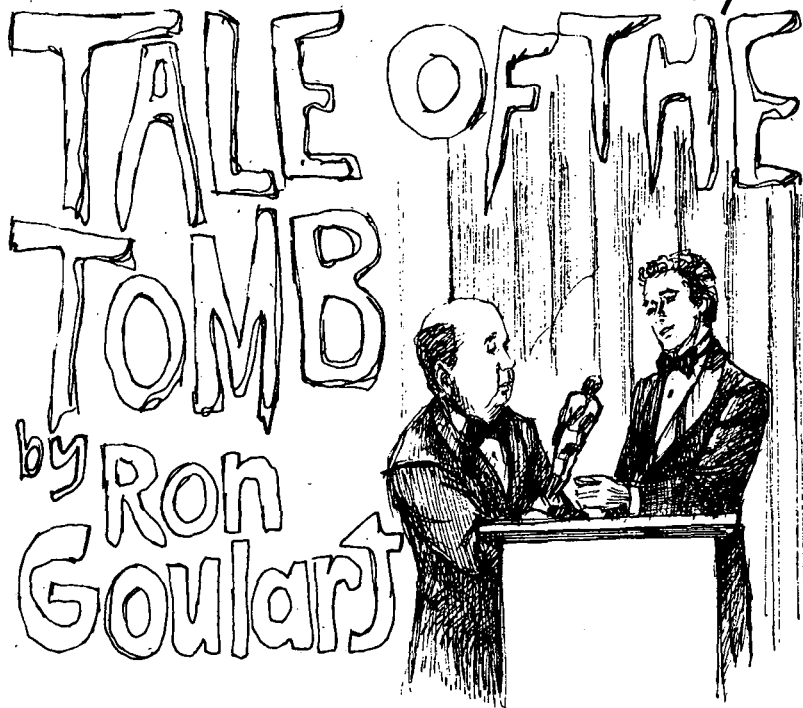
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Hurly had gone on to win an Oscar . . .



It was a horror-movie day, the noontime sky a slatey color, thunder rumbling, and a heavy rain pounding down. Outside our view window at the Inkwell Restaurant the Saugatuck River was a choppy grey. A few sooty seagulls were hunched in vulture poses on the pilings.

"What I'd like to hear," suggested Ty Banner as he set down his martini glass, "is some light and cheerful bit of news that'll fortify my aging heart against the bleakness of the day."

"That leaves me out," grumbled Bud Heinz, slipping something back inside the breast pocket of his tweedy sport jacket. "I was going to show you the lousy contract my syndicate's offering on *Seaweed Sam*. You'd think a strip with three hundred papers would—"

"Eh?" Hollis cupped his ear with the hand that held his vile black cigar. "How many?"

"*Seaweed Sam* runs in over three hundred papers," persisted Heinz.

"Oh, you must be counting the two hundred in Guatemala and—"

"You know damn well I have more papers than that halfwit panel of yours."

"Success," said Zarley suddenly, "is a strange thing."

"True," agreed Banner, reaching for his glass.

"I was prompted to that conclusion by watching the Academy Awards last night on the tube," continued Zarley. "There was this guy, Mike Hurly, winning an Oscar for scripting *Voice of the Gargoyle*. He was radiating success, looking a good ten years younger than he has to be. Just fifteen or twenty years ago he was writing for comic books."

"Hurly, so I hear," said Heinz, "is a dynamo, full of energy, and he doesn't take any crap from moguls. That's the key to his success."

"There's a little more to it than that," put in Mert Younger. Like all of us who meet for lunch every Monday in Westport, Mert is a professional cartoonist. He's about a decade or more older than our next-oldest member, a heavysset guy in his late sixties who looks something like football coaches you see Pat O'Brien playing on the late show.

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

Mert settled some in his chair and folded his big freckled hands on the checkered tablecloth. "Well, I can illustrate more or less what I mean," he said, "by telling you how Mike Hurly came to be managing editor of the Enlightened Magazines line of comic books back in the 1950s. If you're interested."

Banner's handsome, though puffy, face clouded and he glanced out at the glum rainswept day. "I sense another gruesome yarn coming."

"It is that," admitted Mert.

Zarley was doing his anticipatory bouncing on his chair. "Let's hear it, let's hear it," he urged.

"You worked up at EM too, didn't you?" asked Hollis.

Nodding, Mert said, "Oh, yeah, I've bummed around all over the comics industry. When Mike Hurly came to work as a writer at EM I

was in the art bullpen. That was in an office building on Lex in Manhattan, torn down more than ten years ago."

"Tell us the story," said the anxious Zarley. "It is going to be full of dark deeds and violence, isn't it?"

"It'll be about that," said Mert, "and about success."

"We may as well have it," sighed Banner, slouching resignedly.

This was (began Mert) back in the early 1950s sometime. You remember the '50s. Eisenhower was President, Nixon was V.P., there was a sort of war in Korea, and every third teenager was a dead ringer for Henry Winkler. Enlightened Magazines was a second-rate outfit, run by an old ogre named Ernie Gross, who was a cross between Al Capone and that spinster grade-school teacher who was always whacking you across the knuckles with a ruler. Back then, before censorship and the economy killed most of the comic-book industry, even a second-banana setup like Gross's could rake in big dough. We had six funny-book titles going—*Sizzling Combat*, *Frontline Tales*, *Sizzling West*, *Voices from the Grave*, *Tales of the Tomb*, and *Dumb Bunny*. I was in the middle of a divorce then, drinking a little too much, and I considered myself damn lucky to have a regular job in the EM bullpen. Mostly I worked on that godawful funny-animal title, and some days when I was in extra frazzled shape I'd slip and draw bunny ears on the GIs in *Sizzling Combat* or the fiends and vampires in *Tales of the Tomb*.

The managing editor up there was a guy named Jack Grumlin—a long skinny fellow about forty, nervous, impatient, and with a style of speaking akin to a tobacco auctioneer. He was chewing me out about some superfluous bunny ears the first time Mike Hurly came wandering in.

"And why, Mert, did I, at great, no kidding, expense to EM send you over to Fort Davidson, all the way over to New Jersey, don't snicker, to visit a real boot camp? I'll tell you, so you could, this isn't a joke, make the stuff you're drawing, if one can call these feeble hen-scratches drawing, quit smirking, so we can make your stuff authentic. Remember, Mert, I go on a lot of these field trips too, for the good of our magazines, so—"

"O.K.," I said, "I'll erase the bunny ears. It'll look really authentic then."

"It isn't, trust me, just a question of misplaced—What is it?"

Hurly had intruded through the swing door into the bullpen. He was

maybe twenty-five then, good-looking in a sort of roadshow Tony Curtis way, carrying a scruffy briefcase up under his arm. "This is quite exciting for me, Mr. Grumlin," he said, giving us both that ingratiating boyish smile of his. I noticed on TV last night he's still using it. "Admiring you as I do."

"You barged in here just to admire me?"

"Oh, excuse me—I should have offered you my card right away." He came closer, took a business card out of his wallet, and passed it over.

"Michael X. Hurly, Author," read Grumlin in a sneering voice. "If you're looking for work, Hurly, we aren't—"

"You could use me on *Voices from the Grave* and *Tales of the Tomb*," Hurly told him, still smiling. "I have a real penchant for horror and, I hope you'll forgive my saying, the yarns in those two mags right now aren't so hot."

"Oh, so?" Grumlin was folding, unfolding, folding the business card. "And you, a twenty-two-year-old—"

"Twenty-five. I just look youthful."

"A twenty-five-year-old wise guy from—White Plains—you can waltz in here and—"

"Hire him!"

Nearly dropping the card, Grumlin turned. "Are you, Ernie, trying to take a hand in the personnel—"

"Hire him." Gross wobbled into the big room. After taking a couple of mushy drags on his dead cigar he said, "I'm telling you, schmuck, the sales on *Grave* and *Tales* stink. We need new blood. Ha! That's almost a joke."

"Almost," agreed Grumlin, who feared almost nothing in this world save Ernie Gross. "We have Vincent Blade doing most of our horror scripts, Ernie. He's been with EM forever—"

"Fire that schmuck, hire this schmuck."

"Vince just had another heart attack, his wife's pretty near a hopeless cripple, his widowed mother is—"

"Then he has a lot to keep him busy at home and won't miss the job." Gross bit at the soggy end of his cigar. "I'm a multimillionaire," he told Hurly.

"I know, sir. I read a very interesting piece on your fascinating career in last week's *Editor & Publisher*."

"I got to be so filthy rich by playing my hunches," continued our publisher. "You know how many mags we publish?"

"Twenty-seven, counting the new crossword-puzzle digest," replied Hurly with a fresh smile.

"My hunch is you can write this creepy crap good."

"I can, sir, it's my forte."

"Hire him," repeated Gross to Grumlin. "Ten bucks a page for his scripts."

"Ten? We're only paying Vince—"

"He's a hack, and sickly besides. He don't even know how to use words like *penchant* and *forte*." Gross lumbered back to the doorway. "One more thing, schmuck."

Clearing his throat, Grumlin asked, "Which schmuck are you addressing, Ernie?"

Jiggling around, the old man pointed his unlit stogie at him. "You, schmuck," he explained. "What did I tell you about fooling around?"

"Ernie, we can discuss this later, if you happen to be alluding to—"

"I'm alluding, schmuck, to Fancy Milligan—to the most successful model to appear in any of my girlie magazines. When we display her gorgeous body, decked out in a candy-stripe sunsuit, on the cover of *Naughty*, *Lacy*, or *Frilly*, the flapping circulation jumps sixteen percent at the very least. So quit fooling around with her."

"If I happen to have lunch with Miss Milligan now and again, which is, I assure you, Ernie, the extent—"

"I don't care about the extent of your anything," said Gross, scowling. "But listen to me about this. It makes Hugo Mexically mad."

"He's not her husband," said Grumlin. "Hugo is only Miss Milligan's agent and photographer. He's making himself a pretty penny by exploiting her natural charm and—"

"The schlepp is her fiance. He don't like her fooling around," said Gross. "He is also six feet six and weighs two fifty at the very least if he weighs an ounce. I wouldn't like to see Hugo beat you to a pulp, Grumlin."

Grumlin said, "Hugo won't get a chance to—"

"Also I don't want that guy mad at you. From being ticked off at you he could graduate to being mad at me. And when Hugo Mexically is mad at me he won't let us have any more pictures of that stunning bimbo and the circulation of *Frilly*, *Lacy*, and *Naughty* is going to drop sixteen

percent if not more. A word to the wise, schmuck." He went waddling out.

After a few silent seconds Hurly inquired, "When do I start?"

Mike Hurly really did have a knack for writing horror scripts. He was fast, too, and could turn out enough stories for an issue of *Tales of the Tomb* in two, three days. We had to fill fifty-two pages in those days too. When his scripts, illustrated by me and Lennie Starr and some freelancers, started running in the EM horror titles, the monthly circulations started jumping. Sixteen percent the first month, twenty percent the next.

All this naturally delighted old Gross and annoyed Grumlin. Grumlin got to looking even thinner and talking even faster. If you had to letter the way he talked then, you'd string all the words together. Grumlin, who'd been divorced at least twice, hadn't learned his lesson. He really was smitten with Fancy Milligan. She, amazingly, was fond of him too, and their relationship had gone somewhat beyond the sedate lunch stage. He didn't, as Gross had ordered, cease courting that terrifically lovely young woman.

Grumlin managed, even with all his personal and professional worries, to keep cracking the whip. He really did believe in authenticity and he had me traveling to an airfield in Pennsylvania, a mortuary in the Bronx, and, once, even to the Manhattan morgue. Hurly was sent along on that last jaunt to soak up atmosphere for one of his scripts. When you complained to Grumlin, he'd point out that he made a few research trips too, although some of them only involved seeing how a posh restaurant operated or what it was like backstage at the follies.

I'd gotten to know Hurly fairly well, even though he worked at home in his new apartment in Brooklyn Heights and only came into the EM offices once or twice a week to deliver his scripts and pick up his checks. I was never exactly close to the guy—I always felt there was another Mike Hurly behind that pleasant smiling face.

Even then he had tremendous confidence in himself. He was an only child, orphaned in his teens, and he'd put himself through a Westchester community college by working on a local newspaper. Originally he'd wanted to be an actor, and he was a good mimic. He could do Cagney, Bogart, Brando, even old man Gross himself hollering, "Don't a deadline mean nothing to you, schmuck?"

When we got back to the EM offices after that unsettling trip to the morgue, we walked right into a fracas between Grumlin and Hugo Mexically.

The photographer really was large, built along football-player lines. He had a frizzy black beard, he dressed usually in denim suits, and for some reason he almost always had a tiny beret on top of his huge skull. His voice was growly, touched with a trace of middle European accent, the voice a cartoon bear might have. He was holding Grumlin by the shirt-front and yelling. "Don't mess with Fancy," he warned. "I don't want to have to—"

"Hey," said Hurly.

Hugo slowly swiveled his massive head around. "What do you want, squirt?"

"You're Hugo Mexically, aren't you?"

"What if I am? After I take care of this jerk, I'll—"

"No, you misunderstand," said Hurly, giving him his encyclopedia-salesman smile. "I wanted to talk to you about your work."

"Work?"

"In particular about the one-man show you had at the Old Ladies Community Center in Queens a few months ago. There were some splendid photographs on display there, Mr. Mexically."

"It wasn't girly stuff," Mexically admitted, letting go of our editor.

"Exactly, which proves how really versatile you are. That shot of the stray dog poking into the garbage can was especially—"

"What I was trying for was a shot of—"

"And the one of the drunk sleeping in the gutter was even more touching."

"Let's have a cup of coffee," suggested the huge photographer.

"That'd be great."

Going out the door Hugo glanced back at Grumlin. "Stay clear of Fancy, buster."

After Hurly had been working for EM seven or eight months, Gross decided to make him an associate editor. Not just of our two horror titles, but of all six EM comics. Gross actually took us—me, Grumlin, and Hurly—to lunch, in a place with tableclothes on the tables, to announce the promotion. He concluded his speech with, "Keep it up, Mike, and in another six months you'll be managing editor. Ha ha."

Could be Grumlin decided right there at that lunch to do away with Mike Hurly, although he may have been nursing the notion even longer. He never, you understand, confided any of this to me. I just, in light of what happened, pieced this and that together. But most of what I figured out is, I think, pretty close to the truth.

Grumlin was continuing to see the fascinating Fancy Milligan, although he had to be much sneakier. Romancing a lady on the sly is often more expensive and Grumlin was also having some alimony trouble. He didn't want to lose his job at Enlightened and the \$15,000 a year he was pulling down. Damn good money in the '50s, especially from a skinflint like Gross. If Mike Hurly were to cease to exist, Grumlin was certain he could hold onto his managing-editor title.

He came up with a simple and workable, or so he thought, plan. There was, as I mentioned already, a precedent for sending his staff out on location to do first-hand research. So one evening he had Hurly go out, all alone, to an old abandoned airfield on Long Island. Supposedly this was to soak up background material for a script about the ghost of the Red Baron. Thing is, when Hurly is walking around one of the deserted hangars he falls clean through a weak spot in the flooring. He drops about ten feet into an old greasepit, the floor of which is richly strewn with broken bottles.

Hurly twisted his left ankle and tore his sweater sleeve. That was all.

But I guess he must've noticed something that convinced him his accident wasn't one.

Two days later, on a grey, fuzzy fall morning, Grumlin and I were arguing about what kind of noise an antitank gun makes when Hurly, a grin on his face, came limping into the bullpen.

"Even though I didn't, for all my pleading, get to serve in World War Two, Mert, I still know the kind of gun you've got there goes *Kathung*," Grumlin was saying. "What you have—*Thubum!*—is the sound your garbage makes going down the apartment-house chute—Oh, morning, Mike. You look fine, considering."

Hurly perched on a desk edge. "While I was sitting around the doctor's office yesterday," he said, "I got to thinking about the last time I turned my ankle. It happened back when I was around thirteen. Occurred, aptly enough, in a haunted house out near my hometown in Westchester County. It's still there."

Grumlin said, "I thought it was all commuter country out there now."

"No, we still have a few estates," Mike said. "This one is called the Old Fuller Place. Belonged to a cracked millionaire, covers about six overgrown acres, and even has a family vault under the old house someplace. Though I never got up the nerve to really explore the place, the other kids told me it was full of all sorts of secret passages."

"Make a nice setting for a *Tales of the Tomb* story." A thoughtful look had touched Grumlin's lean face.

Hurly smiled. "I haven't told you the best part yet," he said. "There was one of these special rooms way up on the third floor of the rambling Fuller mansion. They call it the Tapestry Room and the legend was that nobody could spend the night up there and survive. So when I was thirteen I made a bet with some pals of mine and tried to spend the night, after conning my poor folks into thinking I was bunking at a friend's. Well, I was up there all alone, imagining, before I'd been in the room for five minutes, that the knights and wizards on the tattered old tapestry were coming to life. When the wind made the tapestry flutter, I led out a yell and went shooting out of there. I was zooming down one of the rickety flights of stairs when I tripped and went tumbling down. I could have broken a leg except I seem to be lucky that way and ended up with just a sprain."

Stroking his chin, Grumlin said, "Think you could last a night in the Tapestry Room now?"

"Probably. Why?"

"Are you willing to try it?" asked our editor casually. "I think it'd give you a darn solid basis for a script."

"All alone, without Mert or anybody?"

"What else? That's the point of it, isn't it? To do a solo?"

Hurly nodded, grinning. "The Fuller Place is still empty and nobody much guards it any more," he said. "I could drive out there and give it a try."

Grumlin asked, "When?"

"Why not tonight?"

The day had grown increasingly gloomier and by nightfall the sky over Westchester was nothing but black scuddy clouds. Grumlin had found out the exact location of the Fuller mansion from a White Plains street directory and as the day was ending he was parking his Studebaker up in the woods behind the place's weedy acres. He went skulking through

the woods, using wilderness techniques he'd picked up while researching a piece on commandos for *Sizzling Combat Comics*, clutching a pair of night binoculars he'd bought at an army-surplus store and a red-plastic flashlight. He planted himself amidst a stand of white maples a few hundred yards from the immense ramshackle white Victorian mansion.

He was hunkered there for nearly two hours before he spotted Hurly arriving.

The writer, carrying a tin lunchbox, a flashlight, and a big thermos, came strolling up the broad weed-filled path leading to the sagging wooden porch of the house. He was whistling as he bounded up to the oaken front door and let himself in. The opening of the old door produced a keening sound that set Grumlin's teeth on edge all the way over at his wooded hiding place.

Hurly had been in the house for a full fifteen minutes before he saw a glow of light at a third-floor window, up in what must be the Tapestry Room. Then he made his way across the dark grounds and went into the old house very carefully. Most of the rooms on the ground floor were boarded up except for a huge library off the main hallway. Its door gaped open.

Before putting his plan into effect, Grumlin checked the room out. He needed a place where he could hide and yet watch the curving staircase that led up to the shadowy upper floors. There were books still on the shelves, but they'd long since been taken over by cobwebs and a grim white mildew. A whole section of wall was swung out and behind it, a careful probe with his shaded flashlight showed him, was a stone-walled passway leading downward—one of the secret corridors Hurly had mentioned.

Nodding, Grumlin clicked off his light and went sneaking out into the hallway. He climbed, slowly and holding his breath, up the staircase, causing not one worn dusty step to creak. At ankle level across the top of the stairway he stretched a length of dark fishing line and fastened it securely with blackheaded pushpins.

What he intended to do was this. Back downstairs he'd make enough noise to rouse Hurly's curiosity. Hurly would come hobbling down from the third floor to investigate the noise and when he hit the final staircase he'd come tumbling down. He'd land hard on the marble floor and that might be enough to kill him.

After the failed accident at the airfield, though, Grumlin was taking no

chances. He'd stay to watch this time and, should Hurly survive the fall, the hunk of towel-wrapped pipe in his pocket would guarantee a fatally cracked skull. After killing Hurly, Grumlin would take down the wire and remove all traces of his visit. Hurly's fatal fall would look like nothing more than an unfortunate accident, a man with a bad ankle taking a false step in the dark.

Grumlin eased back into the library, waiting and listening. He was sure Hurly hadn't heard him laying the trap, but he'd wait a few minutes before making the noises that'd lure his editorial rival to his death.

While Grumlin was still huddled in the dark library counting off the seconds in his head, there were heavy footfalls on the front porch. The massive front door was yanked open and the heavy steps thudded in the hall.

Hugo Mexically's voice was heard. "I know you're here, Grumlin!" he boomed. "This time I fix you for good! Fancy confessed everything tonight and I'm going to kill you!"

Grumlin didn't want to face the mammoth photographer. He could just make out the secret door standing half open. He tiptoed over to it and stepped into the stone passage. Then, it seemed to take ten minutes at least, he pulled it soundlessly shut on himself and heard it click.

Just as he'd shut himself up he heard Hugo right outside.

"Ah! You're in this punk library someplace! I see your footprints in the dust!"

Grumlin clicked on his flashlight. Behind him the passageway slanted down and around. He followed it. Hugo's bellows grew dimmer, the feel of the passage got chillier.

Up ahead his beam showed him a heavy metal door, half open. That might be a way out, or at least a place to hide until Hugo gave up hunting him.

Grumlin ran, light bobbing, through the doorway. He grabbed at the metal handle and pulled the door shut behind him.

He heard it click and lock.

That didn't really scare him until he used his flashlight some. He was inside a windowless stone room old Fuller'd built down under the mansion. The old eccentric's coffin had been here for nearly thirty years, in a tomb that was, once the door was shut tight, soundproof, lightproof, and just about completely airless.

When they located Grumlin nearly two days later he was dead of

suffocation. He'd used his flashlight and the hunk of pipe to try to open the vault's thick metal door, and finally his bare hands. His fingers were bloody and raw.

After the funeral Gross promoted Hurly to the post of managing editor. When the whole EM empire went under in 1956, Hurly's reputation as a crackerjack scripter and editor helped him land a job in New York television. From there it was Hollywood, TV, and then movies—and an Oscar.

"Wait now," said Zarley, rubbing his thumb across his nose. "You didn't tell us how this Hugo What'shisname knew Grumlin was going to be at the haunted house."

"That wasn't Hugo," said Hollis as he lit a fresh cigar.

"Huh?"

Mert nodded. "That was Hurly, doing one of his voice impersonations," he said. "He was pretty certain Grumlin would try to do him in again, so he made sure the next attempt would be on terrain he was familiar with. He knew that Old Fuller Mansion a hell of a lot better than he let on to Grumlin. Soon as he was sure the editor was inside the place, he used some of the secret passages he'd first explored as a kid to get down to the ground level without using the stairways. He came charging in, yelling in a voice very much like Hugo's, and, just as he'd planned, he panicked Grumlin."

"He'd set it up in advance," said Banner, "made sure which way the poor guy would have to run."

"Yeah, exactly," said Mert.

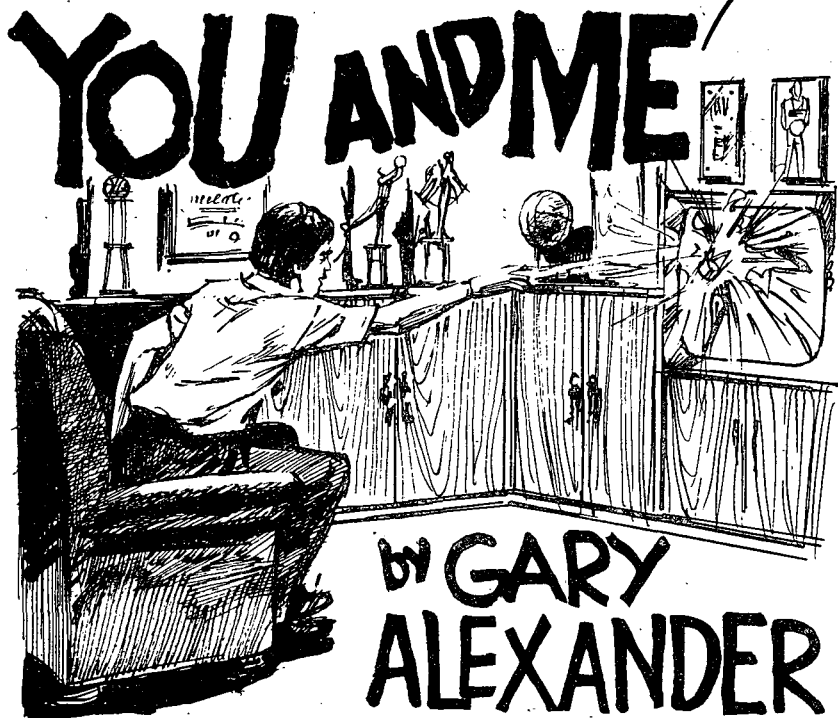
"How'd Hurly explain tracing Grumlin to the house later?" asked Heinz.

"He told everybody Grumlin had phoned him and said he'd decided to do this particular bit of field research himself," Mert replied. "There wasn't anyone alive who could dispute that."

Zarley shivered. "But to let somebody die like that, slowly, from lack of air," he said. "That's terrible."

"I didn't tell you Mike Hurly was a nice guy," reminded Mert. "Only a successful one."

The road trip to the East Coast was brutal . . .



You've said it yourself, usually with a smirk on your face: The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Hardly original, you must admit, and always directed at an obstacle one step above, a player filling a slot on the roster. You always managed to bump him, to displace him one way or another.

You really believed it would last forever, didn't you? Could be why your tumble was so quick and painful:

But why shouldn't you live a fantasy, your own egocentric passion play?

You'd had it your own way for almost as long as you could remember, from the time it was discovered you had an affinity for that child's play orb known as a basketball.

You used to joke cynically that you really turned pro in junior high school and you weren't far off the mark, enjoying the little perks and considerations, the adoration that came when you stepped on the hardwood and dominated your peers with such utter ease. Then high school and the kudos and trophies and writeups and, in your senior year, the college scouts hovering about home and school like a pack of frenzied tomcats on a scent.

And that university you finally chose—well, they didn't roll out the old red carpet because they figured you'd be making some major breakthrough for their physics department. Nor were the fellows with the clipboards and whistles and the sweatsuits with ATH DEPT stenciled on them grooming you for a Phi Beta Kappa key. Not to mention the alumni and their thick midsections and thicker wallets—those relationships had best be left unexplained.

But it was in the pros that you completely lost your perspective and came to believe you were something other than mortal. The money, the women, the cars, the network coverage, the random entourage of hangers-on.

You did produce. No denying that. You had the statistics, the big numbers beside your name in the box scores. And those numbers got even bigger after the knee injury in your fourth season—an entire forest of newsprint was squandered in analysis of that one. But it really wasn't that complicated, was it? You'd lost a fraction of a step on your inside move, a tiny concession to gravity in your midair gymnastics, so you became what best suited your personality anyway, what they call a "pure shooter."

So what if your team lost to the Lakers in the playoffs a couple of years ago? That playoff loot would just put you in a higher tax bracket and cause grief for your accountant. And paraphrasing your media interviews afterwards, you got forty points in the final game, what more could you do?

That was your attitude toward life and your craft: gimme. Hell's bells, man, you could be in the locker room sitting in the Jacuzzi, get the ball, and you'd take a shot. You wouldn't pass off to a teammate unless the basket was in another time zone. You wouldn't pass the spuds to your own mother if she was starving.

But you still had the eye then, that special intangible that made the ball behave as if it were radio-controlled. Oh, you knew how Coach felt about a hot dog, but you always got lucky at the right moment. About the time Coach would have his fill of your one-man show, you'd get into one of your streaks, and those velvety parabolas from everywhere on the floor would touch nothing but twine. Coach would shake his head and sit back down. USDA-prime, organically pure luck. What you needed then was a good swift thump alongside the head to let you know it couldn't last. But who had the right to shake a finger at a living legend?

Ever wonder why Jeanne stayed with you throughout? Maybe the kids or the split-level or whatever. Who can say? And you never cared enough to ask.

Granted, it was her fault too. She'd have to be in a monastery transcribing scrolls not to know your philosophy on marriage. At home we're a clip from *Father Knows Best*, on the road every man for himself.

She kept her mouth shut about the drinking too, especially in the last two years when things started going sour. Must've been her self-preservation instincts. She'd seen that mean streak welling to the surface. She'd been bounced off the wall a couple of times and didn't want to go two-out-of-three.

You brought that fury with you on the court too, didn't you? Our little secret.

Take Ted Mills, for example. You dreaded it when you played the Bulls. Mills, in the parlance, was a "defensive specialist." He didn't guard you, he wore you. He had the knack of anticipating your moves, cutting off your lanes. You threw up your "patented jumper" and all you saw was Ted Mills. What was your career average against him, eight-point-six or so?

You saw your chance and you took it. The Chicago center snagged a rebound and slung it to a guard in full stride. The crowd and the zebras followed the fast break; you and Mills trailed. With a subtle sidestep you chopped his legs out from under him. The doctors said it was fortunate his kneecap hadn't shattered in a hundred pieces.

That was the season before your time of reckoning, remember? The college draft that year coincided with your thirtieth birthday—a delicious irony. When Bassett was taken in the first round by your club, your ticker hit bottom. Bassett played your position, would be groomed eventually to fill your very large shoes, explained the team's P.R. guy on the sports

news that night. What the hell did you expect? Age thirty in professional sports is a geriatric benchmark. And that perfectly aimed highball glass that cracked the twenty-five-inch television screen mounted in the wall of your rec room did little but exacerbate your balance-of-payments problem.

Worse, Bassett proved to be a dream, all silk and mercury on the floor, the quintessential team player. If he couldn't pass a camel through the eye of a needle, he'd certainly try with a basketball if an open man was on the other side.

He was the first guy at practice, the last out. He actually listened to Coach. Disgusting, wasn't it?

You've got savvy though, we have to grant you that. You picked up on the threat right off the bat, hauled it out to the sporting press, and fed them back their own clichés. Yeah, it was a candy-from-a-baby sort of thing, but you had to take your advantage where you found it.

I've been staying late with Bassett in practice, you said. The kid's got unlimited potential. He can only help our ball club, so if there's anything I can do to bring him along faster, heck, I'll do it. I want that championship ring so bad I can taste it.

They lapped it up, but you knew they would. Easy money. Some of those boys can't read their own copy without moving their lips.

Coach was tougher. You'd heard the rumors too about you being on the trading block. There was even a story circulating that you'd been offered to the new expansion team for a song. Now expansion clubs will generally invite anyone to camp who still has a pulse, but they weren't returning phone calls on *you*.

You iced it with Coach, though, when you volunteered to room with Bassett on the road, despite your agent's last contract guaranteeing you a private one, among other absurdities. He went public with it, praising your past contributions, your talent, and that fact that you would be a "stabilizing influence" on the lad and his development. Rubbish. All of it.

You'd decided what to do about Bassett early. It was merely a question of opportunity. By midseason you were running scared; you had to make your move.

You were still in the starting lineup but Bassett was getting more and more minutes, coming off the bench. He was spotting things on the floor you'd never have seen even if you were looking. A defensive weakness.

A potential mismatch. Anything that could get the team two points. No twenty-five-foot bombs for Bassett if he could dish the ball to a teammate breaking underneath for a cripple.

Bassett was second in the league in assists and your club was only a game out of first place. He was the catalyst in that thing they call chemistry; that special blend of talent and unselfishness that separates winners from losers. And everyone knew it.

You got your chance during that brutal road trip to the East Coast. Eight games in thirteen days. You had the Nets and the Knicks on consecutive evenings and the Celtics were next. Bassett had iced the win over the Knicks by sinking two foul shots with one second showing on the clock. You'd been watching from the bench, seething at Coach's decision to play the kid instead of you in such a pressure situation. You'd wondered what pumped through the kid's veins as you saw him drop in those free throws, seemingly oblivious to the taunts of fifteen thousand hostile fans. You knew then that you had to do it and do it *soon*.

You relaxed with Bassett afterwards in your hotel room, taking in a little TV. The setting was perfect. It was a grand old hotel, not one of those hermetically sealed concrete-and-glass structures you stayed at in other cities. It had been said in jest that the club had billeted their ballplayers there since Fort Wayne and Syracuse were in the league. Your room was two floors from the roof.

You pulled out a bottle of twenty-year-old brandy and suggested a victory drink.

Bassett wasn't much of a drinker, limiting it to a few beers when he did. He begged off, pointing out Coach's objections to hard liquor on long road grinds.

You had the book on him, though, didn't you? Small-town background, small college, a need to be accepted by his colleagues, a general naiveté, and, most importantly, a feeling of near idolatry toward you.

Suit yourself, you said snidely. You're in the bigs now, not the Little League. Sometimes I have the impression I'm a babysitter.

Well—he shrugged—I guess one wouldn't hurt.

By and by you and Bassett had worked the waterline of that brandy well down into the label and it was becoming smoother and smoother. The tube was still on and *The Late Show* was nothing to write home about.

Let's shut off the nightlight and head up to the roof, you suggested.

ve got a story for most of those bright lights we'll be seeing. The weather was unseasonably mild and the kid had never been on an eastern swing before.

How about Coach? he reminded you. We've got an early flight to Boston and—

Coach, you said, had his warm milk hours ago. He's all curled up with his teddy bear, cutting zees. Same with the other guys.

Bassett doubled up in laughter. Since the third drink everything you said was witty and hilarious. So off you went, tiptoeing down the hall to the fire stairs, bringing your jug. It took a while since Bassett was so jiddy. Every time he'd trip on a step he'd pause and giggle.

But you had the roof to yourselves and the view was magnificent. You had to work fast, however—even with the unusual warmth, January was January and the breeze was bracing and sobering.

This is this and that is that, you told your tourist. But let's get over here by the edge and see if we can see this, you added with a nudge and a worldly wink. It's a story you're not gonna believe.

So there you were, literally craning your necks over the side, squinting up a street for a better peek at the Chrysler Building or whatever.

A natural athlete is a natural athlete is a natural athlete, over the hill or not. In an instant you had his ankles, jerked out of your crouch, brought your hands to your chest, and released.

Up and over and down. Twenty-eight flights. And he was clutching the bottle. You were careful about that.

You were the best-known pallbearer. The dreadful accident made the network news. You bore up reasonably well in the post-funeral interviews. Choked yet articulate words, streaks of moisture on your rugged face. A second career as an actor or a sports commentator was a possibility.

The team disintegrated. Morale, grief, the loss of Bassett's technical ability—who could say? Your team lost the last game of the season and blew the final playoff spot in your division. You played the entire forty-eight minutes, scored thirty-seven points.

Your genuine tears fell later, in the fall, in training camp. A funny thing happened. You were cut, placed on waivers. Any team in the league could claim you for a little cash and the price of a phone call. When it rang, it wasn't some general manager or coach, it was the IRS. This tax

shelter, this off-shore drilling thing your agent had slipped you into, well, it wasn't exactly clear what was going on there and could you please come on over.

Your knee had been acting up in camp. Your jukes and fakes were about as much a surprise as inflation. And you could swear somebody had nailed a lid on the basket whenever you threw up your long-range artillery.

And when you staggered home that night to a split-level empty of Jeanne, the kids, most of the furnishings, and the 450SL, maybe you could have appreciated the sheer logistics of it if you'd been in a better frame of mind.

You thought out her disloyalty long and hard but didn't really come up with anything, did you? The rationalization that she split after learning that you were no longer a big-time jock wore thin soon. After you stopped seasoning your morning coffee with Jack Daniels. But don't pat yourself too hard on the back—it wasn't any easier on me than you.

So here we are, guy, you and me. I appreciate the fact that you finally unlocked the closet and allowed me to see some daylight. Rough on the eyes at first, but I'll adapt. If you can, I can.

Steady as she goes, fella, we're almost there. Yeah, I know police stations can be intimidating, especially the older ones like this one, with all that brick and granite and all those cruisers parked out front. It's an image thing, you know. This isn't some lingerie store we're walking into. We're not waltzing in there to get our teeth cleaned. We won't be asking somebody to keep the sideburns heavy either. We've got something to discuss and we've already called ahead, so it won't be a big surprise.

There'll be some guys just sitting around, waiting to hear what happened in New York last winter. Very curious, very laid back, you have my word.

Easy, hang on, we're nearly there. Forget Jeanne, forget Ted Mills, forget everything else. I'm not bugging out this time. I'm with you. I always have been.

**The January 6 Issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's
Mystery Magazine* will be on sale December 10.**

*Mr. Durnling's aim was to serve the departed and their families
in their hour of need . . .*

SERVICES

by
**KELLY
H. BLAU**



Murderers. Mr. Durnling sighed mentally. The poor things are so *innocent!*

Seemingly intent on riffling the pages of the notebook balanced on his blue-serge knee, he continued his unobtrusive appraisal of the woman in the wingchair opposite. Even without the definitive testimony of Mr. Eckhart's body, the signs were there. Not blatant yet, of course. Indeed, her black-wool suit, tailored white-silk blouse, and sensible black pumps

were a paean to bereaved widowhood. It was the little things that caught Mr. Durnling's experienced eye. Waves of grey hair so obviously recently redone into an impertinently flippant style, blurs of eyeshadow applied with an untrained touch, a vague dreaminess in the eyes, the mouth half smiling in placid contentment.

Having located the Eckhart entry, Mr. Durnling pressed a plump finger along the seam to flatten the notebook in place and shook his head in silent wonderment. No matter how often he encountered it, the naïveté never ceased to amaze him. If the police didn't cart them away immediately the deed was done, they seemed to puff up with their own cleverness and feel compelled to shout their accomplishment to the world. The ones who gave in to ego and blurted their little secret into any convenient ear soon lost their newfound freedom and were not Mr. Durnling's concern. The ones that resorted to uncharacteristic hairdos and romantic daydreaming were.

"Mrs. Eckhart?" Mr. Durnling cleared his throat politely behind his fist for attention. "Mrs. Eckhart, I'm afraid we have a little problem."

Mrs. Eckhart dragged herself back from her fantasy relaxation on the chaise at Waikiki where she had been listening to a waiter extol the relative merits of the various mai tais. What was that drink again? A Suffering Bastard? Just the thing to salute Edward! And Mr. Durnling, too, she added generously as the agitated roundness of his face swam regrettably back into view. Really, the man was such a prissy fussbudget! Stifling an irreverent giggle, she straightened her shoulders against the chair and tilted her head in polite attention.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Durnling. A problem, did you say? I thought the arrangements were all— Surely it isn't the church service? Reverend Graymore assured me he had spoken to you."

"No—oh, no," Mr. Durnling denied hastily, slightly piqued that there would be any doubt of such a matter once the Durnling Funeral Home had taken charge. "The arrangements are quite in order and—" he mused modestly "—I hope satisfactory?"

"Oh, *yes!* Everything is just *wonderful!* That is—" she amended in an effort to cover what she was afraid might have been unseemly enthusiasm "—I mean, well, you've been most helpful during this very difficult time. The flowers are lovely. And Edward! Edward looks so natural and—and peaceful."

As well he should, in Mr. Durnling's view, reposing as he was in the

super-deluxe mahogany with brass handles and tufted white-silk lining. But then that was one of the more endearing indicators. Murderers invariably opted for top of the line.

"You mentioned a problem," Mrs. Eckhart prompted politely. "If it isn't the arrangements I'm afraid I don't— Oh! Is it the money? Your fee, I mean? Edward had quite ample insurance. Surely I mentioned that before."

"No, no, my dear." Mr. Durnling cavalierly dismissed finances with an expansive wave. "There's no question of fee. Not at *all*. Actually—" he leaned toward her confidingly "—our little problem is *you*."

"Me?"

"I'm afraid so," Mr. Durnling confirmed solemnly.

"But I don't understand."

"No, of course you don't. *Of course* you don't," Mr. Durnling agreed with soothing gentleness, leaning further forward to pat her hand.

The notebook, temporarily ignored, slipped off his knee to rest with a muted thud on the carpet between his feet. Most irritating, but he elected to leave it there. At least until this first hurdle was safely negotiated. In the preliminary evaluation Mrs. Eckhart had chalked out as levelheaded and stable, but that was hardly a positive guarantee of her reactions. Just the week before, Mrs. Rapposo had wailed and beat her breast for forty-five minutes. But Mrs. Eckhart was of more stoic English extraction. Still, one could only pray that there wasn't a *scene*. Mr. Durnling took a deep breath.

"The thing is, you see, I know about your husband. About how he died."

"Well, certainly you know how Edward died, Mr. Durnling," Mrs. Eckhart agreed with wary calmness. "You have the death certificate, I believe. Edward had a heart attack. Our doctor signed the certificate himself."

"Doctors!" Mr. Durnling snorted, allowing himself a hint of professional disdain. "Doctors, my dear, see only what they wish to see. If there isn't a bullet wound in the middle of the forehead or a knife in the chest then it's 'natural causes.' The *stories* I could tell— But here, I'm digressing. The fact is, the medical profession does tend to take matters at face value, as you know, and—" he wagged a finger at her playfully "—as you counted on, now didn't you? In my field we are naturally more observant."

Mrs. Eckhart stared into the reflection of Mr. Durnling's glasses with

all the mute horrified fascination she would have accorded the appearance of a serpent crawling out of his ear. Reassured and gratified by her demeanor, Mr. Durnling allowed himself to relax into a more comfortable position, hands tented over the wealth of his vest, index fingers tapping lightly in cadence with his words.

"My professional duties are quite—*detailed*, my dear. Yes, detailed. And quite, *quite* thorough. It is highly unlikely that any—shall we say, irregularity?—would escape my scrutiny. A needle puncture in a rather awkward location, for instance."

"I—see."

Mrs. Eckhart's face paled, leaving the aqua eyeshadow garishly bruised crescents above lusterless mudpuddle eyes. Her thumbs clenched in a cross atop her clasped fingers, squeezing until the knuckles blushed lividly.

"He was already dead, you know." She pushed her head back against the chair, her mouth a pursed line drawing her quivering chin into a fretwork of resignation. "Edward, I mean. He was already dead. All those years—thirty-eight years we were married—talking about how we would travel when he retired. We never took a real vacation because of that, saving for Hawaii, Tahiti, any island where it was warm and he'd be able to sit under a palm tree drinking fancy drinks in coconuts. Then his heart acted up."

Her voice was distant, the words coming out in fits and starts and the creases in her forehead deepened as she sought to explain. Somehow, that seemed very important.

"He could still work. The doctor said he just had to take it easy, but the company—well, there are always younger, healthier men, aren't there? So Edward retired. Only not just from the job. All he'd do was sit in front of the TV. What about Hawaii? I'd say. *Hawaii*? My God, he wouldn't even go out in the *yard*. He was still breathing, but he was dead, you know? Dead. The problem was—after a while I got to realizing I wasn't."

"Ahhhh," Mr. Durnling crooned sympathetically. "That is so often the case, I'm afraid. So often."

"Well." Mrs. Eckhart sighed with finality, forcing her lips into a hovering smile. "Now it's over and I guess I won't be going to Hawaii either. Are the police here?"

"The police? Oh, I haven't called the police. There isn't the slightest

need to get them involved in the matter. Not the *slightest* need. Unless you would prefer it, of course."

"Prefer it?" Mrs. Eckhart parroted in confusion. "I don't understand. What possible difference could my preference make about whether you call the police or not? Unless—unless— How much?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"How *much*? How much money will make you forget what you know, Mr. Durnling? That is the alternative, isn't it? Blackmail?"

"Madam—" Mr. Durnling's nostrils flared as though her words had detonated some vile odor into the room "—I shall endeavor to attribute your demeaning suggestion to your overwrought emotional state, but I must tell you that I find the implication highly insulting! Service! Service, Mrs. Eckhart! My aim is to serve those departed and their families who come to me in their hour of need."

Yanking the glasses from his quivering nose, Mr. Durnling pulled a neatly folded handkerchief from his breast pocket and polished viciously at the lens in an effort to bring himself under control. It was too much television, he thought in waspish martyrdom. All that crime invariably made people jump to the very worst conclusions. It was more insufferable each time it happened. But then, everyone had his cross.

"I asked for this interview as a friend, Mrs. Eckhart," he announced with quiet dignity, primly returning the glasses and handkerchief to their proper places. "I wished to warn you—merely as a trusted confidant—that you, you *yourself*, are behaving in a manner that must eventually lead to the uncovering of your secret. It is a precarious road you travel, Mrs. Eckhart, a road more safely walked in the company of those who understand. I wanted to offer you the services of just such a company, Mrs. Eckhart—a most congenial little group of people much like yourself. In short, I merely wanted to invite you to join our club."

"Your *club*? Of people like me? You mean they—they all—"

"Oh, yes. It's a membership requirement. Come now—" he chided at her incredulous stare "—surely you didn't think you were the only one? Men retire unhappily everyday, you know. And then there are husbands with difficult wives. And families with elderly relatives they can no longer afford. Not that your solution is *universal*, you understand, but certainly not uncommon either. Why *our* membership alone was just under two hundred at last count.

"We operate along much the same lines as any self-help organization.

Our members provide a safe ear for those with the urge to confide, but of course our major aim is to be on the alert for any aberrant behavior so that we can nip it in the bud. You simply wouldn't believe how many people go off on absolute tangents. Outlandish new wardrobes. Even sexual carrying on, if you catch my meaning. Human nature being what it is, that sort of thing causes friends and relatives to *talk*. Too much speculation leads to the conclusion that the bereavement is being enjoyed to a suspicious degree and before you know it there is an official inquiry. The real purpose of our vigilance is to avoid all that because, believe me, my dear, exhumations are extremely painful for everyone concerned."

"I imagine so," Mrs. Eckhart murmured weakly.

"But we need not dwell on unpleasantries. Focus instead on the delightful benefits. The assurance of a life of freedom, social intercourse with peers, gentle guidance. Will you join us, my dear?"

Mrs. Eckhart chewed at her lip with indecision, her mind a whirling jumble of frenetic thoughts. Two hundred murderers! People who had killed. She wasn't like that. But, yes, she was. And it had been rather nice to be able to explain about Edward, a kind of release. And really, when you came down to it, she had been awfully clever in the way—

"Yes. Yes, Mr. Durnling. I will."

"Splendid! Oh, splendid, my dear!" Huffing over his impeding paunch, Mr. Durnling managed to retrieve the fallen notebook and flicked at the pages impatiently. "I was so sure you would see the wisdom— Now where are you? Ahh, here you are. Mirabelle Eckhart. Your personal mentor will be Miss Adelaide Bingham." He smiled benignly. "Perhaps you know her. The assistant librarian? She had an arthritic mother."

Mrs. Eckhart shook her head wonderingly.

"Well, no matter. Unfortunately, Miss Bingham works during the day, but she'll drop by this evening for calling hours. She'll be a great comfort to you, I know, the two of you having so much in common. A love of travel and all.

"Sol!" Mr. Durnling snapped the book closed with the pleasure of one successfully completing a tedious but worthy task. "That's settled. Now just as soon as we have your check for ten thousand dollars everything will be copacetic, as they say."

"Ten thousand—dollars?"

"Well, yes," Mr. Durnling agreed with an apologetic grimace. "But

future increments are a mere five thousand per annum—determined on a sliding scale based on income, of course.”

“But,” Mrs. Eckhart stuttered, “that’s black— I mean, you said—”

“I *said*, my dear, that I am here to serve you and so I *am*. The club is a service I provide for my families who need it, just as I do my best to provide out-of-season flowers when a family requests them or alter my routine to accommodate particular religious traditions. And why do I do these things? Simply so that I may serve you to the best of my humble ability.

“Not that I begrudge any special effort these services may require, you understand. Far from it. Still, these little extras can hardly be classified as standard procedure and, well, surely, my dear,” Mr. Durnling argued practically, “*surely* you can see the necessity for a small cover charge?”

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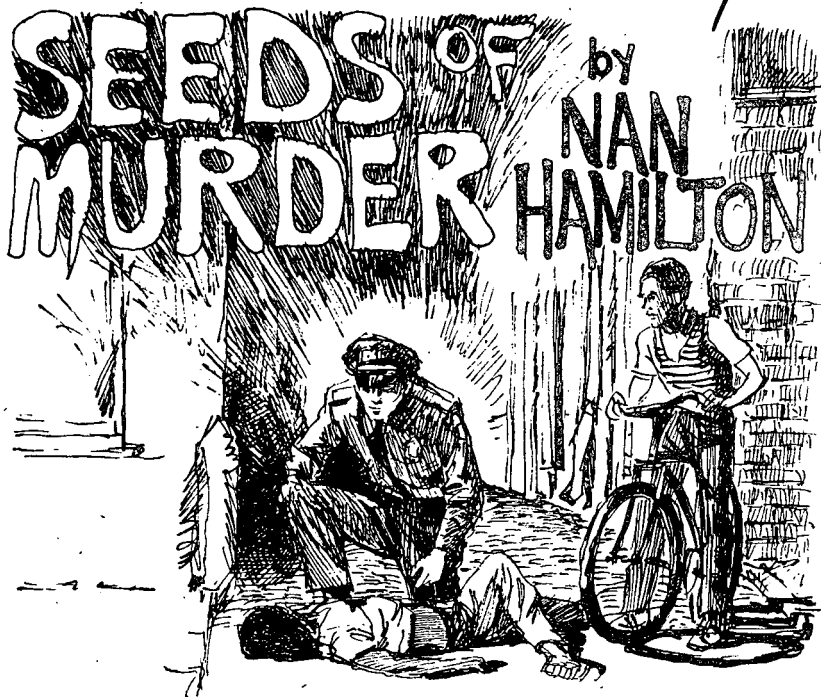
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Ohara believed each man carries the seeds of his own murder . . .



The street lamp cast a pale shadow of imitation daylight over Detective Sam Ohara and a body sprawled in the mouth of a narrow alley. Ohara was oblivious of the growing crowd that pushed against the police cordon around the area. In his mind was another body he'd been called to view just the week before—Ricci Arcano, teenage hoodlum, beaten to death in a lonely section of the neighborhood park. He was still trying to nail

that one down, and now another teenager had been killed in the same way.

A boy who'd almost ridden his bike into the body had identified the corpse as Billy Smith. One of the patrol officers knew Billy from past experience. "Billy Smith was bad news. Anything going down, he was running it," he said.

Meanwhile Jake Woszinski, Ohara's partner, tried to get something more from the witness. "Before you found Billy, did you see anyone else on the street?"

"No. It was too dark—that's why I almost hit him."

"Did you know Billy well?"

"Sure, who doesn't? Billy says jump, you jump. He's big time."

"Not any more." Jake dampened the misguided hero worship, then, after a few more questions, released the boy with a comforting pat on the shoulder. He walked over to Ohara, his massive bulk making even his partner's muscular build seem slender. "Well, what do you think, Sam? Shall I call Califano on the gang angle?"

"Wouldn't hurt," Ohara replied. They'd called Califano's gang detail on the Arcano case, but they'd come up empty. Maybe this time would be different.

Using a patrol officer's flashlight, Ohara knelt for a closer look at the injuries. There was a strange orderliness about them—five distinct blows to the upper torso, one to each side of the neck, one to the chest, one to the throat, and one to the forehead. The other victim had had only two wounds—a deep blow into the skull and another penetrating the right eye.

A disturbance in the crowd brought Ohara to his feet. Three officers were trying to restrain a heavy black man determined to break through the line. "That's my brother Billy!" he shouted. "Let me through, you pigs!"

"Let him through," Ohara directed.

Released, the man came over at a run, then stopped dead to stare down at the body. Three years inside for armed robbery hadn't changed Elmo Smith. Ohara had put him there, but Elmo gave no sign of recognition. Whatever he felt, the man's bearded face revealed nothing. The streetlight touched his shaven skull and caught the gleam of a small gold earring that was his trademark but no sign of tears, no pain. When he turned his eyes to Ohara, they were full of hate, and his big hands clenched and shook.

Jake Woszinski stepped closer to his partner, ready for action, but Elmo merely folded his heavy arms across his chest and looked at them. "I can tell you who did it, cop," he said. "Sure you want to know?"

"I want to know." Ohara, well schooled in the martial arts, watched Elmo's face for the first unconscious telegraph of impending attack. Elmo almost smiled.

"Well, you don't need to do no lookin'. It was your buddy, the Jap cop that patrols this neighborhood. He beat the hell out of Billy with his stick last night, like he said he would."

A voice from the crowd shouted, "Right on, Elmo! We heard him hassle Billy plenty times!"

The police line tightened and moved in toward Elmo and the two detectives. Ohara gestured with his hand—that kind of intervention could be disastrous right then. His face was Buddhalike in its impassive calm. "We'll check out what you say, Elmo, but there are other possibilities. Billy's been in more than one gang rumble—"

"Sure, you Japs'll stick together. You'll cover your buddy." Elmo's voice grew louder as his shoulder muscles bunched. Ohara shifted his stance, ready to block the threatened blow, but it never came. Elmo changed his mind—he had something more to say. "Listen good, cop, you can't save your buddy nohow. Everybody here knows what I say is true and the whole damn city is gonna know it—"

"All right, Elmo, that's enough!" Jake moved forward and Elmo, big as he was, gave way before weight, power, and physical presence that outmatched his own. He raised his hands in mock surrender.

"Don't hit me, Officer, no need to hit me. I ain't gonna start anything here. I just want that yellow bastard tied up legal. I want him behind bars where there'll be a lot of the brothers waiting for him."

The crowd shouted enthusiastic support. "Right on, man—stick it to them!" Elmo grinned but said nothing more.

An ambulance pulled up, creating a diversion. Ohara nodded toward Jake. "This officer will take you to the station so you can make a full statement."

"Sure." Elmo's smile was triumphant. "I'll give him a statement. I'll even tell him where to find a witness." He glanced down at Billy's body for one brief moment, then followed Jake to the police car.

Ohara went over and spoke to the patrol sergeant. "If anybody in the crowd wants to make a statement, take it."

As the ambulance men began their work, Ohara moved to the curb. Elmo's accusation against Jim Takeguchi had come like a kick in the stomach, but he dismissed it for what it was, a grandstand play for revenge.

It was his personal philosophy that each man carries the seeds of his own murder. What those seeds were in Billy Smith's case, he still had to determine. Jim Takeguchi was a long-time friend. He was a good officer and put in a lot of time at the police Boys' Club teaching martial arts to disadvantaged youngsters. The very idea of Jim beating a boy to death was inconceivable.

He turned his mind back to Ricci Arcano. If he could prove the killings were connected, Jim was in the clear. He and Jim had been bowling together at the time of the Arcano killing.

The events of the next twenty-four hours evaporated Ohara's early assurance. Though it was well past time to go home, he was still at his desk going over the accumulating mass of reports. So far they'd all borne out Elmo's claims. A witness had seen Takeguchi tailing Billy Smith shortly before the killing. The wound measurements matched those of a police baton. A witness testified to seeing Jim standing over Billy, his baton in his hand, on the night before the murder. Jim's baton showed several new scratches.

A familiar voice pulled him up from his spiraling depression. "Hey, Irish, brought you a cup of coffee." Desk Sergeant Tim Reagan set a steaming mug down on the desk.

"Thanks, Tim." Ohara did his best to summon a grateful smile as he took up the unwanted coffee and sipped.

Reagan's florid, habitually jolly face showed concern. He liked the Japanese-American detective more than he'd thought he would at first. In his view, an Ohara without an apostrophe was no Ohara at all, and a first name of Isamu was not to be tolerated. So, thanks to Reagan, the new detective had become "Irish" Ohara.

Fortunately, Ohara had appreciated the joke with an unexpected sense of humor. Moreover, he looked like the lead samurai in a Kurasawa film. And he'd proved to be a top-drawer cop—that counted with Reagan most of all.

Now the sergeant offered rough sympathy. "Just looked in to see if I could help," he said. "Jim's a good lad. Anything new?"

"Nothing that helps." Ohara was quiet a moment. "Which way are the guys betting?" The words came out like a challenge.

Reagan looked uncomfortable. "You know how it is, Irish, everybody's rooting for Jim, but it doesn't look good. It didn't help any that he was in a one-man patrol with no partner to back up his story about chasing a narco suspect. It sounds thin."

"Thank the city budget-cutters for that. Jim's admitted he trailed Billy on other occasions as a mugging suspect, but says he didn't that night. Elmo's witness is a teenage prostitute Jim pulled in for soliciting a month ago. I'd call her biased."

"The worst bit is the scratches on his baton." Reagan dropped the words like nails in a coffin. The Department brass was paranoid on any hint of police brutality.

"How much time do you think I've got?"

There'd already been talk about putting somebody else on the case before the papers could start speculating as to what one Japanese cop might do to protect another. Reagan tried to soften the blow. "Captain Krause won't be back until tomorrow night."

"I see." Ohara knew what would come first with the Captain—the Department image. "I'd better get moving."

"You'd better go home and get some sleep first." Reagan's voice was intentionally gruff to hide his feelings. "Sure there's nothing I can do?"

Since Jake was busy exploring the Arcano case for new leads Ohara appreciated the offer. "It's just a hunch, Tim, but would you check back on the squawk sheet and see if anything came in from the area around that time?"

Reagan looked surprised, but nodded. "I'll get on it."

Once more alone, Ohara took out the photographs of Billy Smith's battered body. The ugly wounds intrigued him—both collar bones were broken, the center of the forehead was gouged by a deep hole, the larynx was smashed and the chest penetrated at the sternum. There had been great strength behind the blows. There was no similarity with the Ricci Arcano photos. Ricci had been small, not much over five feet, and compared with Billy's six foot one he looked like a child. The only connection so far was that he'd been murdered in a park that was on Jim's beat.

He reread the crucial point in Jim Takeguchi's statement: "Billy was always hassling the kids at the Boys' Club. That night, I was teaching a class in Aikido, and he got so troublesome I physically had to put him

out. Just a bum's rush, I didn't hurt him. Later when I was leaving the club I caught him beating up on one of the smaller kids. I broke it up and in the process he grabbed my baton. I took it back from him, but that's all I did. I never touched him."

It occurred to Ohara that one question had not been asked or answered. He looked at his watch. There was still time to stop at Jim Takeguchi's on his way home.

As he was about to leave the station, Reagan caught up with him. "Hey, Irish, I got something for you."

"Let's have it."

"I checked the squawk sheet and damned if your hunch didn't pay off. A woman on the corner of the block where Billy was killed reported a man knocked down in the crosswalk. She requested an ambulance. Her name is Timmons. Here's her address."

"Thanks, Tim, this could be a break."

"Funny thing, Ohara, when the paramedics got there, there wasn't a victim or a vehicle."

Jim Takeguchi and his wife were so pathetically glad to see him Ohara wished he had better news. They had a beer and talked of commonplace things to ease the tension, then Ohara asked, "When you broke up the fight and Billy took your baton, what happened? Give me details. Did you just lift it out of his hand or what?"

"Well, no, come to think of it. He started to run away, tripped over the other kid's feet, and fell off the curb. The baton was jammed under him. I grabbed him, picked him up, and took the baton away."

"Did you look at it?"

"No, I just put it back on my clip."

"So the baton could have been scratched on the curb in Billy's fall." Ohara looked pleased.

Jim smiled too, and for the first time in days it was not forced.

Next morning Ohara visited Mrs. Timmons, who was more than willing to talk. "You police should do something," she unburdened herself. "This used to be a nice neighborhood. Now we're afraid to go out on the street because of the kids. They run in packs, push you off the street, grab your purse, knock you down if you say anything. That Billy Smith that got killed, he was one of them." She paused to take a breath, her plump

cheeks red with anger. "I don't believe that policeman did it like they say. Those kids did it. You'll find out."

The support was heartening but Ohara drew her back to the accident she'd seen. The only new fact that emerged was that the victim was a blind man. "I've seen him before tapping along with his cane."

"Do you have any idea where he lives?"

"Seems to me I saw him on the porch of one of those bungalows two or three streets over."

Ohara thanked her and left. The blind man might be only half a witness, but he'd try to find him. Before he did, he called his partner, Jake—who had bad news and worse news. "Nothing in the gang hit," Jake reported, "nothing new on Arcano either. Vince Scott will probably get the nod to take over tomorrow. For your protection, they're saying."

"Jake, do me a favor. I'm going to stay out of touch for a while. I'm hunting a witness. Check records and see what you can find out about any muggings that took place in the neighborhood in the last six months. Get the data and drop it off for me at Fujima's restaurant. He's reliable. I'll collect it."

"Will do," Jake promised. "But Ohara, don't stick your neck out too far."

Ohara had to cruise several blocks before he came to an enclave of 1928-vintage frame bungalows, differing only in the color of their faded paint. A few had bars across the windows—a sad commentary, he thought, on the times and the neighborhood. He knocked on doors for two blocks before a woman finally said, "Only blind man I know is Charley Drummond. Lives around the corner, yellow house."

Charley Drummond's house was one of those with barred windows. The door was opened by a plump Japanese woman with greying hair. Her look of apprehension faded as he identified himself.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Drummond—" On a hunch he added, "About the accident."

It was the right approach. The door opened wider. "A neighbor took him to the clinic, but he should be back soon. Please come in."

The woman led Ohara down a spotless hallway. "I live across the street and come in each day to fix him a hot meal and clean up a little. He's just lost since his wife was killed, poor thing."

She opened a sliding door onto a room that was a total surprise. Au-

tomatically Ohara removed his shoes before he stepped onto the tatami mat of a wholly Japanese room, a room that should not have existed in such a place, should not have belonged to a man named Charley Drummond. "Please sit down," the woman smiled, "I'll bring tea."

As he waited, Ohara looked around him at a memory of another world. *Shoji* screens hid the ugly barred windows; a low lacquer table and two antique chests gleamed with the reverent patina of age. The scroll painting in the *tokonoma* was a fine *sumie* work of a gauzy insect balanced delicately on a bending water reed. Beneath it, a woven basket held an arrangement of tiny bronze mums. Above the chests was a small shrine and beside it a photograph. He went over to examine it. It was a wedding picture of a tall man in an American officer's uniform of the Second World War, by his side his Japanese bride. Her face under the wide bridal headdress was gentle and classically beautiful. On the opposite wall was a collection of Japanese weapons, a complete suit of armor, and, in a glass case, a short ceremonial sword that could only have been made by the hand of a master. A white cane stood in the corner.

The woman returned with a teapot and two cups on a tray, set it down on the table, poured a cup for Ohara, and handed it to him. "Please excuse me, but I must get back to my cooking. Mr. Drummond will not be long."

Ohara was content to sit in this room and sip the fragrant mountain tea which, like everything around him, was exceptional. Before long the slam of a car door and slow steps on the porch punctuated by the tapping of a cane heralded Drummond's arrival. Ohara stood up as he listened to an explanation in hurried Japanese of the policeman, Ohara, who waited.

In a moment a man as tall as himself appeared in the archway. His strong face was framed by white hair that lay blunt-cut just below his ears. Despite deep lines in his face, the man's body was erect and suggested a virile strength that defied age. One of his arms was supported by a sling. There was no doubt that he was the officer in the photograph.

He was not pleased by his visitor. His brows drew together over sightless blue eyes which were fixed on the general area of the table. "Mary says you've come about the accident. I didn't send for the police. I'm making no charge."

"That's as you wish, Mr. Drummond," Ohara's answer was in Japanese and the man's frown changed to surprise. "Actually it's the time of the accident that interests me."

"Your name—it's O'Hara?"

"It's Isamu Ohara, but I am an American police officer."

Drummond slipped off his sandals and turned to the woman, "*O cha, Mary, kudasai.*"

"It's already on the table," she answered as she closed the sliding doors, leaving the two men alone. Without hesitation Drummond walked with the sureness of familiarity the few steps to the table and sat down on the cushion. Ohara sat too, and waited as Drummond felt for the teapot and cup, poured for himself, then lifted the cup and drank. "Why are you interested in the time?"

"It's possible you may have been witness to a crime. A boy was killed around the time you were knocked down, probably a few minutes before."

Drummond's lips twitched in a humorless smile. "I couldn't possibly have seen anything. I've been blind for ten years."

"But you might have heard someone on the street," Ohara suggested. "A voice—steps—a car driving away—"

"Who was killed?"

"A neighborhood boy, Billy Smith—he was beaten to death."

"I heard nothing, no one." Drummond was precise. "Was this boy one of that pack of young hoodlums who have been making our lives a nightmare?"

"Yes."

"Small loss." The soft voice was louder now and iron hard.

"That's possible, Mr. Drummond. But it's my job to find his murderer. You might call it a matter of justice."

"Justice for whom?"

"For an innocent man who will be accused of the murder. A man who is my friend, the policeman on the beat. He's incapable of such brutality."

Drummond set down his cup carefully. "That's too bad. But, as I said, I heard nothing. I can't help you."

Ohara couldn't escape the feeling that Drummond did know something, but was determined not to become involved. "I'm sorry, Mr. Drummond." Ohara stood up, then paused. "At least my trip was not for nothing."

Surprised, his host raised his head. Ohara went on. "It was worth the trip to see your collection of weapons and armor, and particularly that remarkable sword. It's a masterpiece." He walked over and stood before the case.

In a moment Drummond rose and came to stand beside him. "It was made by a master, one of the Awataguchi swordsmiths." With his good arm he raised the lid of the case so Ohara could gaze directly at the blade.

"The metal is almost pure white," Ohara remarked.

"It was a treasure of my wife's family," Drummond explained. "It came to her as the only survivor of the war. When I die it will go back to the museum in Tokyo. Its name is Honor."

Ohara completed the symbolic words all Japanese know to be the true meaning of the sword. "Life undefiled by evil, as well as death with honor."

A silent rapport grew between the two men, one Japanese by heritage, the other by love. Drummond closed the case, then said, this time in English, "I'm sorry about your friend. I wish I could help."

For Ohara the short walk to his car was like stepping back into another world. His next stop would be Fujima's to pick up the information Jake had gathered. As he drove, he faced the bleak fact that his lead had fizzled out. But though something kept pushing at his consciousness from his interview, he finally turned his thoughts to the puzzle of Billy Smith's wounds. And, like a light going on, he saw it. The wounds had a familiar pattern—left, right, top of the head, the throat, the body. Those were the scoring points of a kendo match. When delivered against an opponent well protected by body armor and a head mask they were harmless, but if an expert had used the kendo *bokan* with full force on Billy he wouldn't have stood a chance. Ohara had practiced a little kendo himself and was annoyed that he hadn't caught it sooner.

But there was no kendo pattern to Ricci Arcano's wounds, and if the cases were related there should have been. The discovery, however, gave him another lead to check out. But first, the stop at Fujima's.

The proprietor of the restaurant promptly produced a sealed envelope. "This was left for you, Isamu. How about a nice bowl of noodles?"

Ohara thanked his old friend, seated himself at a corner table, and opened the envelope. He began to scan the list of muggings, looking for Japanese names and reading Jake's careful notes beside each entry.

One name stopped him cold: Nobuko Drummond, a rape and mugging fatality.

He was interrupted by the arrival of the noodles and the familiar aroma teased him into eating.

Charles Drummond was the kind of man to exact his own vengeance, but his blindness made it physically impossible for him to have committed the assault. Ohara slowly drained the bowl, thinking hard. It was more likely that Drummond had hired a surrogate. Where would he find one with the requisite Japanese skill?

The obvious place to start was Kobayashi's *kendo dojo*, in West Los Angeles. Drummond, with his love of Japanese weaponry, could well know of it. Kobayashi, a pupil of the great master Mori, had run the *dojo* since the master's death. It was an unlikely hunting ground for an assassin—the traditions did not encourage such people—but in today's changing world there were those who studied the martial arts for profit, with no feeling for the ancient tradition that placed character and honor above skill.

When Ohara arrived at the *dojo*, Kobayashi was supervising the practice of two pairs of students. It was a familiar atmosphere—the pounding of feet on the bare floor, the guttural point-calls, the sharp sounds of the *shinai* against armor. "Time you came to practice, Isamu," Kobayashi greeted Ohara, all smiles. Judging by appearances, no one would have guessed at the power and speed in his short stocky body.

"No practice today, Sensei, but I'd like to ask some questions, important questions."

After brief instructions to the students, Kobayashi led the way to his office. There, Ohara asked his questions and was stunned by the answers. Kobayashi took down a collection of old press clippings on kendo matches, found one from a Tokyo paper, and handed it to Ohara. "That's the man."

"Yes," Ohara echoed, "that's the man."

"He used to practice in the *dojo* regularly. I haven't seen him for some time," Kobayashi said. "He would be capable of it."

Ohara thanked him and left. As he stepped out into the street it was already turning dark. He felt heavy and depleted as he got into his car and headed for Charles Drummond's small barred home. It gave him no pleasure to trap admissions from a man like Drummond but it had to be done if Jim was to be cleared. Now that the first domino had fallen, another toppled—he remembered what it was that had disturbed him that afternoon. It disturbed him now even more.

When he knocked on Drummond's door, Mary answered. "But he's gone for a walk in the park."

"Where's the park?" Ohara's face was grim.

"Around the corner to the right and three blocks over. You can't miss—" He was gone before she'd finished her sentence, and as she watched him run for his car she grew suddenly afraid.

A sense of impending disaster filled Ohara as he drove the few blocks to the park, scanning the pedestrians on the dark street, watching for the white cane.

He drew up at the park entrance, got out of the car, and began to follow the winding path between dense shrubbery and overhanging trees that offered plenty of shelter to a mugger. It was further down this path that Ricci Arcano had died. Now it was deserted—people had become wary. Only a man like Drummond with nothing to live for would have come here.

He heard it ahead of him—the regular unhurried tap of the blind man's cane. The path, Ohara knew, wound in a slow curve and passed under a stone bridge—that's where it would happen.

The tapping stopped. Ohara began to run. As he rounded the curve, a man screamed. He could see them now—a man cringing in agony as his intended victim raised a white cane, his sinewy wrists already turning for the downward blow to the head.

"No, Tora, no!" Ohara shouted as with a final burst of speed he managed to place himself before the injured man. He raised his arm, extending the flow of his *ki* along it to block the descending white arc. From the impact of the blow, he knew that at the last moment Drummond had pulled back.

"Don't interfere, Ohara." Drummond's voice rasped with effort. "These young murderers raped and killed my wife. It's only justice."

"Justice is my job," Ohara began. He never heard the step behind him; he saw only the lightning jab of the white cane coming toward him, then over his shoulder. Ohara whirled as another attacker cried out and fell to the ground, the broken bottle he had held rolling away as he clutched his bleeding right eye. His screaming masked any other sound, but in pure defensive reflex Ohara turned to face Drummond in time to see a third youth leap at the blind man with an open switchblade. Drummond's keen hearing, his "inner sight" failed him; he turned too late and the knife bit into his side.

Ohara lunged forward, grasped the attacker's wrist, and twisted sharply

upward. His fingers continued their relentless pressure until the youth dropped to his knees. A further upward twist and it was all over. Ohara handcuffed the moaning boy. The other two would be causing no trouble. Ohara turned to Drummond. He had slipped to the ground, pressing his hand against his side. Blood seeped between his fingers.

"I'll call an ambulance," Ohara said. "I won't be long."

He sprinted to his car, called for the paramedics, then raced back. Drummond was twisting his head from side to side, calling Ohara's name.

Ohara knelt beside him, supporting his body as Drummond tried to rise. "Better not to move," he said.

Drummond shook his head. "I want to tell you—"

"I know most of it, Tora Gaijin."

"How do you know my *kendo* name?"

"An hour ago I saw it, along with your picture, among the *kendo* champions of all time. They called you Tora Gaijin, Foreign Tiger."

Drummond gave a weak smile. "And the *kendo*, how did you find out about that?"

"I too practice *kendo*. Eventually I recognized the pattern in Billy Smith's wounds. Then I remembered *two* white canes—one you carried this afternoon, a conventional one; the other was this one." He nodded toward the heavy white *bokan* lying on the ground. "It was in the corner of your room among your weapons."

Drummond wet his lips. "I had to do it—for Nobuko, you understand? The first two times—"

"Two times?"

"Yes, the first was a week ago, right here. But he was a smaller boy and I almost missed him. My ears told me where he was, but not where to strike. But he came at me a second time, and I didn't miss, did I?"

"No, Tora, you didn't miss." Ohara began to lay him down, but Drummond clutched his arm. "I came out tonight because of your friend. I thought if I got another one they couldn't blame him."

"No, he'll be all right now." Ohara had trouble keeping his voice steady.

Drummond sighed. "That's good. I'm not a murderer. It was justice only." He closed his eyes and his face went slack. Ohara eased his body to the ground. It was time for the blind tiger to be set free.

An ambulance wailed to a stop in the distance, but Ohara scarcely heard. He was thinking of a sword made by a master and what it stood for. "Life undefiled by evil—death with honor."

He was called the Happy Banker because he loved to collect . . .

THE WEDDING PRESENT

by
LAWRENCE
TREAT



Curly took it. A practically brand new \$50,000 Rolls Royce.

"It was parked there, in that cheap neighborhood," he said. "The keys were on the curb, the door was open. What was I supposed to do? Let somebody else take it? So I got in and I come straight here to pick you up. Not a bad crate, is it?"

Curly. My pal. My buddy. I'd been a punch man, that was my specialty.

I'd been in for a few years and Curly'd been my cellmate. We were close, like one and-two.

Anyhow, I loved him and trusted him. We were solid—or at least I thought so until he had a chance to promote himself by a few bucks, and then where was he? Telling the cops I'd heisted it, when all I'd done was park it for the night. I'd left it behind the garage and figured I'd bring it around in the morning and maybe get a reward.

I don't blame Curly for borrowing it. He was married and had one kid with another one coming. He had a nine-to-five job that boxed him in like a circus tiger, so he needed a little diversion. And even without having to bust loose once in a while, who doesn't want to get behind the wheel of one of those Rolls? It had a bunch of buttons and dashboard lights that flashed on and off like a bunch of Rumanian candles.

Naturally we had the radio going, which was how we happened to hear that somebody had gone off with J. D. Singleton's brand new Silver Cloud that he'd left on a street somewhere, for reasons he was bashful about telling but I could guess.

At the name, Curly let out a yell. "J. D.—that's my boss!" He panicked and started pressing all the buttons, with the end result that he knocked over a hydrant and ripped off a fender and came to a peaceful rest on the sidewalk.

He gave me the look of a man who's just discovered his wife in fragrant delectation, as the phrase goes in law. "Mike," he said, "if J. D. ever finds out about this, it's goodbye job, and blacklist everywhere else." Then he kind of grinned at me and said, "Thanks for the ride." That was the last I saw of him. He hotfooted it for the bosom of his family and stayed there.

I could have followed him and saddled the police with the problem of who took the Rolls, but I like to finish what I'm in, and this offered possibilities. What, for instance, had J. D. Singleton been doing while his car was parked in that neighborhood, which had well known uses? A question like that, man to man, might be worth quite a little dough.

I smudged up the license plates a little and drove off. I passed a cop here and there, but I guess they'd never seen a Rolls before because they didn't even smirk.

I drove carefully, jumped no red lights, and broke down no traffic rules, then parked the car in the bushes behind the place where I lived. I figured I'd return the car in the morning and tell how I'd risked my life recovering it. If I had a good enough story, I ought to manage a reward

out of it. The fender was something of a problem, but I had a whole night to think about it.

Only I didn't. The police barged in a little before midnight, and everybody got something out of it—Curly got a promotion, Singleton got his car back, and I got two years. I could have brought Curly into it, but what good would that have done me? I was stuck with the car—it was damaged and it was stolen—how could I talk myself out of that?

I tried to convince the judge that the fault was Singleton's for leaving his car unlocked and that I'd impounded it to protect it against unlawful entry and other damage, but he wasn't convinced.

"Including the fender?" he said, and scheduled me for a slowjourn in Walpole.

That's when the wheels started turning. Being low man on the total pole, I was told to fork up. Five grand to fix that fender and I'd get a suspended sentence.

To me, it was compounding a felony, because Singleton was accepting a bribe to lay off me, the repair man was getting away with a five-grand robbery, the insurance company was acting as an accomplice after the fact, and the state went along with it so they wouldn't inconvenience their Walpole tenants by overcrowding the place. All of that on my five grand.

I got it from the Happy Banker, called that because he loves to collect. He bailed me out at the rate of ten percent a month and I was free, except for a parole officer by the name of Makepeace. He had a jaw shaped like the end of a canoe and when he talked it looked like the canoe was hitting rough water. Still, this canoodle took his work seriously and got me a job in a machine shop. Maybe somebody there had a sense of humor, because they put me on a punch press. In a way, it kept me in practice.

That was where I met Danny-Boy. He was big for his age, which was twenty, and his brains were in his hands. He could fix practically anything, but he had trouble talking and he got his words mixed up. The gang laughed at him, but I laid off. I felt sorry for the guy and the way he said left when he meant right, or shot-hot instead of hot-shot. I guess part of the reason I understood him is that once in a while I get a word a little bit wrong, but who doesn't?

Anyhow, Danny-Boy got a fix on me and got to thinking nobody was in my class. He followed me around the way Mary followed her lamb, couldn't do enough for me. When I said his lunch looked good, he wanted

to give it to me—he said it was special, his sister Cleo made it for him and she'd be glad to make me the same kind.

He kept talking about Cleo and how wonderful she was. She'd brought him up after their parents died. She'd taken care of him and made sure he got an education, and she fed him and darned his socks and would I like her to darn mine?

I shied off. He was building up to merging the two of us matrimonially, and it was getting harder and harder to shake him and his dinner invitations off. I figured *he* looked like one of the Befores in a Before and After, and I wanted none of *her*. No, ma'am. I'm a loner and I trust nobody.

Meanwhile, the Happy Banker was getting a little restless and my debt was piling up. The canoodle guessed I was worried, and he was full of questions and watching me like a shark. He called for me at the plant and drove me home a couple of times—hell, he practically tucked me in bed. I tried to grin and forbear it, but what with everything caving in on me I finally told Danny sure, I'd come to dinner, and we set it up for a Saturday night.

I figured Cleo would spend her morning in the beauty parlor and the rest of the day cooking, knocking off in time to get dolled up for the evening and all set to make forward passes at me. In self-defense I had me a good stiff drink before going there.

I survived the evening, but by the end of it I was hanging on the ropes. Cleo had me mesmerized and bowdlerized and plagiarized. She had big grey eyes that turned me into a ten-year-old in love with his teacher. I wanted to get down on my knees. I wanted to be seven feet tall. I wanted to sweep her up with my brilliant repartee while I worshipped her in awed silence.

"Cleo," I said when Danny introduced us. She told me later that the way I said it made her fall for me like a feather, slow and easy. I couldn't tell you what we said or whether Danny stuck around or left us on our own, but by ten o'clock I was a changed man and believed in love, hope, faith, and the American system of justice.

Still, I had some sense left and I knew Cleo would eventually have to hear about my past, so why not now?

"There's something you ought to know about me," I said. "I've served time. I've got a record."

"That's nothing," she said. "So have I." And she resumed the business of the evening.

I never got any details, but in a general way I found out that Danny-Boy liked to open locks and that when a door was open she usually walked in, but that lately they'd been taking a vacation.

In due time I told them about the Happy Banker and what he usually did to people who didn't pay up.

Cleo almost wept. "I hate funerals," she said. "When my mother died I stayed home from work and cried for a whole week. Then I got fired."

Danny, however, had a more positive approach. "Five thousand?" he said. "The payroll's twice that."

"What payroll?"

"At the plant. Where we work."

"What about it?"

Sometimes Danny's a little hard to understand. "For my wedding present for the two of you," he said, "I'll get you the whole ten."

It took me a while to untangle him, but what he meant was that the company usually stashed their payroll in the safe on Thursday night and shelled it out the next morning. I'd noticed the safe and had told myself it would take me five minutes to get inside it if I ever had the chance. The rub was that the alarm system was modern and complicated and if you even *thought* of breaking and entering it flashed lights and rang bells all over the place. That was why the company hadn't replaced that old-fashioned safe. But they hadn't figured on Danny-Boy.

"How can you get in?" I asked.

"Easy. I left my sweater in the shop one Friday and I went back and got it on Saturday."

"Get me in and get me out," I said. "The chief problem is that canoodle. He thinks I'm up to something and he checks me out practically every hour."

That was when Cleo had her brilliant idea. "Use him for your alibi," she said. "He wants you to marry somebody who'll keep you straight, doesn't he? So invite him here for dinner to meet me. He can drive you. Then if his car won't start and it's around midnight and the buses aren't running you and he will have to stay here overnight. You'd both be in the same room, see?"

"What do I do then?" I said. "Bring him along to hold the tools?"

"He'll sleep," Cleo said. "Just leave it to me." . . .

It was like a family gathering that night. The canoodle questioned Cleo about her background. She said she'd been brought up in a convent and that she was an old-fashioned girl with old-fashioned ideas, and would he have another root beer? She'd made it herself.

He had the other root beer and then he said he was tired and we ought to go home. But when we got in his car it wouldn't start. When Cleo suggested we stay overnight he let himself get persuaded. The last thing he said to me as we went to bed was, "I hope you don't snore. I'm a light sleeper."

I answered by making a rumbling noise, but by then he was in the arms of Orpheus, as they say. So, with him as my alibi, I went out and watched Danny undo whatever he'd done to the car.

We drove out to the plant and parked a full block away.

Danny's system was simple. "I fixed a skylight," he said. "All I have to do is get to the roof."

"By helicopter?" I said.

"By rope. See that ventilator pipe?"

The building was only two stories high and Danny handled a lasso as if he'd been brought up on the Texas grange. What he did inside in order to turn off the electronic masterpieces I don't know, but after a few minutes he opened a rear door and I walked in.

I've never handled an easier punch job. I used a rubber hammer and I muffled my blows. We had the safe open in under two minutes.

I left the same way I came in and so did Danny. He reset the alarm system, hooked up the skylight the way it had been, and came down on his rope. He shook it loose from the cornice that had secured it and an hour after we'd left the house we were back home and safe.

We stuffed the money in a paper bag in case the canoodle should happen to see it, but when Danny-Boy said he was going to hold onto it we had a little argument.

"The first person they're going to suspect is you," he said. "If you don't have the money what can they prove?"

"It's my wedding present," I said. "Remember? So give it here, or else."

He obeyed without much enthusiasm and I put the bag in plain sight on the kitchen table so the canoodle would get used to it and not get suspicious when I took it home. I figured that as soon as I got rid of him I'd settle up with the Happy Banker.

To nobody's surprise except Mr. Makepeace Canoodle's, his car worked fine the next morning. Right after breakfast I got in the front seat and put the paper bag on my lap.

"What's that?" he asked.

"A piece of last night's cake that Cleo gave me."

"Interesting girl," he said. "She seems fond of you."

He drove straight to police headquarters, where he told them to take the paper bag and book me for larceny and criminal trespass. He told them how he'd woken up in the middle of the night, noticed my bed was empty, and later on heard me threaten Danny. In the morning the radio carried the robbery item and when I got in the car with the bag he guessed I had the loot.

Maybe the police would have eased up on me, maybe I could've cooked up a believable story if it hadn't been for Danny-Boy. Because when he admitted what he'd done and tried to explain how he'd turned off the burglar alarm they laughed at him. They claimed he was trying to save me and they didn't believe a word he said.

I'm back in Walpole, and my loan interest is piling up. So far I owe the Happy Banker about ten grand, but by the time I get out it'll be around thirty.

Danny says not to worry, as soon as I'm out he'll knock off the Happy Banker and be glad to do it. Which I believe. And I know exactly what will happen then.

They'll get me for murder.

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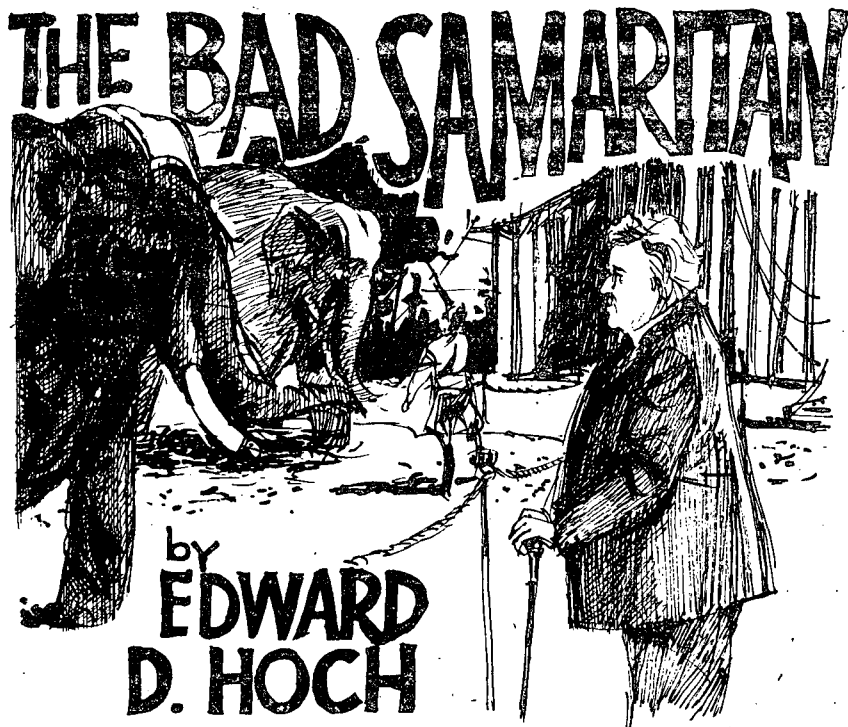
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The travelers were attacked on the road to Jericho . . .



My name is Jack Foxx and I'm going to tell you about the time G. K. Chesterton came to Nashville, and a phantom circus with a killer clown, and an elephant that didn't write a book. I want to tell you about what really happened on the road to Jericho back in the spring of 1921.

I was a small-time booking agent in those days, arranging lecture tours for evangelists, authors, political figures, and anyone else who wanted to make a little money stumping the Southland. When the noted British

author Gilbert Keith Chesterton came to America that year on his first lecture tour a New York agent of my acquaintance contacted me to handle the southern and western ends of the circuit. Chesterton was to be in the United States and Canada for more than three months; from January through April, and it was arranged that he'd deliver forty lectures in twenty-six cities.

I worked out a schedule for my end of the journey that would take him as far west as Oklahoma City and as far south as Nashville, where I arranged to meet him upon his arrival by train. I expected him to draw the largest audience of this western swing in St. Louis and I felt I should get to know the man a bit before we encountered the high-pressure press of that Mississippi River city. Quiet, conservative Nashville seemed the perfect place for our first meeting.

I had no problem identifying Chesterton as he stepped from the train at the downtown station. He was a huge man with a shaggy moustache and pince-nez eyeglasses on a string. Though the evening was reasonably balmy he wore a bulky coat with a great velvet collar, giving evidence of his recent tour through the North.

I hurried forward to introduce myself and he clasped my hand in his. "Ho, Foxx, a pleasure to meet you! They tell me back in New York you're responsible for me while I'm here. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"Where *are* all the people in this town?" he asked, glancing around. The station was nearly deserted.

"We only have 118,000 people in Nashville," I admitted. "Nothing to compare with New York or Chicago. But we are the state capital. I'll show you the sights in the morning."

He grunted and reached out to take one of his bags from the porter. I loaded myself down with two others and led the way to my battered black Ford in the parking lot. "I've put you up at a nice hotel," I told him. "I'm sure you'll like it."

He squeezed into the car with some difficulty. I remembered from the biographical sheet that he was around forty-seven years old, but his weight and movements made him appear well over fifty. Still, he had a humorous quality that appealed to me at once.

"The hotel doesn't matter," he said as we drove through the nearly deserted streets. "I've found during my brief stay in America that they're all the same. There is no such thing as an inn here. Every city—at least

those I've visited—has its almost identical downtown hotels, and even within the hotels every floor is the same as every other floor. I must remark on that in the collection of essays I'm writing about my journey."

"I'm afraid you *won't* find this one any different from the others," I admitted. "But the city does have a very fine liberal-minded daily newspaper, the *Nashville Tennessean*. It was an early supporter of giving women the vote in this country, and now that's finally happened."

"Ah, but not until after you passed another constitutional amendment restricting intoxicants to the wealthier classes."

"Prohibition hardly favors the wealthy," I started to protest, but he chuckled.

"If you had country inns here, as we do back home, hard liquor could never be banned. It would be like chucking Chaucer out of the Tabard or Shakespeare out of the Mermaid!"

I turned the Ford into Main Street and pulled up in front of our best hotel. If he'd expected to be met by dignitaries and the press he gave no sign of disappointment when a single elderly bellman shambled forth to collect his luggage.

"I'll pick you up for breakfast in the morning," I promised as I took my leave, "and show you some of the sights."

The lecture was scheduled for 8:30 the following evening. I wondered how many people would attend at the auditorium I'd engaged for the talk, but the turnout was gratifyingly large. Chesterton was a witty, marvelous speaker of the sort audiences love.

Most of the press met him before the lecture, but Harvey Bradshaw—a political columnist for one of the morning dailies—had been late arriving so at the end of the talk I ushered him up to meet Chesterton.

"A pleasure, sir," the reporter said. He pulled a notebook from his pocket and got right to business. "Will England be able to solve the Irish problem this year?"

Chesterton drew up his immense bulk. "I'm more at ease commenting on literature and philosophy."

"As a Catholic you no doubt side with the Irish—"

Chesterton turned to me. "Mr. Foxx, please tell the gentleman I am not a Catholic—not yet, at least. Simply because I've published two collections of stories about a detective named Father Brown, I am known

as a pillar of the Church. I venture to say that Dante and Milton were not viewed as devils for writing about Satan."

"Your closeness to the Catholic faith is widely known," the reporter protested.

"And I do not deny it. In the future I might well become a Roman Catholic, but I have not yet taken that step."

Bradshaw shrugged, aware he was getting nowhere. "A pleasure meeting you, sir," he said, closing his notebook. "I have to get back to the office now and dictate the column into my machine. I hope we meet again."

After he left I said, "It's only ten-thirty. I'm one of those people you accuse of violating the prohibition amendment, or the Volstead Act which implemented it. If you'd care for a drink—"

"That is a fine and generous offer, Mr. Foxx," Chesterton said. He had produced a walking-stick I hadn't noticed him using before. I wondered if the lateness of the hour was tiring his legs. "But I shan't be tempted by it. Not tonight, at least. I want to work a bit on the notes for my essays before I retire."

"You're really writing a book about the trip?"

He nodded. "I expect to call it *What I Saw in America* and to publish it next year." As he spoke he glanced with annoyance at his hand and wiped a spot of red grease from it with his handkerchief. I wondered if he'd get the impression Nashville was a grimy city. In truth it was a clean, almost Grecian city. Earlier that day I'd shown him the tomb of President Polk on the Capitol grounds, and the pure Greek architecture of our State House. I even showed him a copy of the Parthenon in Centennial Park and drove out eleven miles east of the city to Andrew Jackson's beautiful old plantation home, "The Hermitage." I was hoping to show him Vanderbilt and Fisk Universities in the morning before his departure.

But both our plans for the moment were suddenly changed as a black Ford with the word *Police* on its side drove up and stopped in the street before us. I recognized an old friend, Sergeant Troy, at once. "Foxx!" he called out to me. "Can you come with me to the hospital?"

"What's the matter?" I asked, hurrying to the car.

"There's been an accident out on Jericho Road. Mike Osher's dead and Tom O'Neill's in bad shape."

"Tom!" We'd known each other for years, ever since he took on the job as Osher's press agent. Politics were as important in Nashville as in

any other American city, and politics in Nashville meant Mike Osher. "What happened to them?"

"At first it looked like an auto accident. O'Neill's car was off the road and down an embankment. But he's telling some crazy story about a circus parade and a clown who came and shot them."

"What's this?" Chesterton asked, coming over to us.

"Sergeant Troy, this is G. K. Chesterton, the British author. He gave a lecture here tonight."

The two men shook hands and Troy said, "I don't read much but I think I saw a story of yours in *The Golden Book*. You write about that priest, Father Brown, don't you?"

"I have in the past, and I expect to again."

"They're good stories."

I turned apologetically toward Chesterton. "I really should go on to the hospital. O'Neill is an old friend."

"Let me accompany you. The idea of a circus parade and a murderous clown intrigues me."

We climbed into the police car and were at the hospital within five minutes. Walking down the corridor behind Chesterton and the police sergeant I couldn't help but notice the stark contrast. Troy was a slim, steely man, an imposing figure in his police uniform, but for all that Chesterton was even more imposing.

We found Tom O'Neill in a hospital bed, conscious but wrapped in bandages. A doctor working on him as we entered informed us they had removed a bullet from his shoulder.

"At least that part of his story was true," Troy admitted. "Somebody did shoot him."

"Mike Osher was killed by a bullet too," the doctor informed us. "It looks like it went right through the heart."

I went to the side of the bed. "Tom, can you hear me?"

O'Neill's brown eyes opened, looking pained but reasonably alert. "Jack, you old-fox! I knew you'd come."

"How are you feeling? Do you have much pain?"

"Not bad. The doctor says it's mostly the bruises from the accident. Luckily the bullet just got me in the shoulder."

I introduced him to Chesterton, who shook his hand gingerly. "What happened to you?" he inquired.

"It's the damndest, most bizarre thing you ever heard," Tom said,

shifting slightly in the bed, grimacing with a spurt of pain from his wounded shoulder. "Mike wanted to drive out and meet with Clay Waldon in Jericho. You probably heard we've been having some trouble out there. We left Nashville just after dinner and were on the Jericho road when another car came along behind us and forced us into the ditch. The car tipped over and rolled down the embankment."

"Did you see the other driver?" Sergeant Troy asked.

"No, not a thing. It was too dark. He kept on going. I must have lost consciousness for a while and when I came to I found I was pinned in the overturned car. I couldn't free my leg."

"What about Osher?" I asked.

"I think he was nearby but he didn't answer when I called. He must have been unconscious. I could hear cars passing on the road above and I yelled for help but I guess nobody heard me. Then came the strange part. I heard music—circus music on a steam calliope. It was coming along the road, heading toward Jericho. And I could hear other sounds in the darkness too—wagons passing by, and elephants trumpeting. It was a circus parade. I shouted for help as loud as I could."

"And someone came?" Chesterton asked, a sort of gleam in his eyes.

"Someone came all right. I heard him scurrying down the hillside in the dark. He reached the overturned car and struck a match. That's when I saw it was a circus clown, with a baggy suit and clown makeup and a wig. I told him there'd been an accident and we needed help. But he didn't answer. He didn't say a word. He lit another match and went over to where Mike was lying. He bent over him and reached into his baggy suit and took out a pistol. I fully expected it to be one of those trick things that fires a little flag that says *Bang!* or something. He pointed the pistol at Osher and shot him in the chest. I think I hollered and tried to pull free, but I was still pinned down. The clown lit a third match and came over to me. I can still see those big drawn-on red lips as he raised the pistol and fired. He was a sad-faced clown but I know he was smiling when he shot me."

"Then what happened?"

"I felt the bullet strike and I closed my eyes, waiting for a second shot. But none came. Then I heard the clown scurrying back up the hill to the road. And the circus music and the sound of the animals moved on toward Jericho."

"Is there a circus in Jericho?" Chesterton asked.

Sergeant Troy nodded. "One opens there tomorrow. The circus usually plays there because there's lots of open space for their tents. They can draw people from Nashville and some of the smaller places like Franklin and Bethlehem."

Tom O'Neill had closed his eyes and the doctor motioned us out. "He really should be resting. You can question him again tomorrow."

Out in the hall I asked Troy who'd finally found the wreck. "Funny thing," he replied. "The police received an anonymous phone call just before ten o'clock reporting an accident on the Jericho road. I suppose it might have been the killer himself who called, but I can't imagine why."

"Will you be going out to the circus?" Chesterton asked Troy.

"Right now, in fact. Do you and Foxx want to come along?"

I took out my pocket watch—it was well after eleven and I knew Chesterton had a morning train to catch—but he waved that aside. "I wish to see this circus," he said simply. "It is, after all, a sample of Americana."

As we climbed back into the police car I asked, "Is it the clown that fascinates you so much?"

"The clown? Heavens, no. Clowns are merely men with painted faces. It's the elephants that intrigue me. I've always had a fondness for elephants. In my novel, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, I had a character named Sunday ride a zoo elephant through the streets of London to escape his pursuers."

"Well," Troy remarked, "maybe the elephants will tell you why that clown killed Mike Osher."

"I sincerely hope so," Chesterton agreed. "You know the great elephant Jumbo was a resident of our Regent's Park Zoo before joining the Barnum show. Those were fine days for elephants. But they seem to have grown smaller as everything else has grown larger."

"I hadn't thought about that," I said as Troy's car headed out the Jericho road.

"Perhaps someday, a hundred years from now or sooner, crowds will flock to some municipal zoo to see the last living elephant, or the last giraffe. I believe in appreciating these creatures while they're still present on God's good earth."

It was almost midnight when the distant lights of the circus came into view. I remembered as a boy how I'd run down to the railway siding and

watched them unload in early morning, but this time they'd come by night, assembling in the darkness so they'd be ready for the dawn.

"They come to town the night before," I commented to Chesterton.

"So did I," he reminded me with a twinkle. "Like the elephants I need a good night's sleep before I perform."

A woman named Sharon Storm met us as we left the police car in front of the rising big top. Even by the uncertain light of the glowing torches I could see she was lovely. "Are you one of the performers?" Troy asked.

She nodded. "High wire. You want to see our permits?"

"I want to see your clowns. Where are they?"

"Only one traveled with us. The rest are driving here overnight."

"Where's the one who came with you?"

She turned, glanced around at the identical figures working in the half light, and shouted, "Willy! Man here to see you!"

His name was Willy Madis and I guessed his age at about thirty-five. He had deep-set eyes and a pug nose. Dressed as he was in a sweater and workpants he hardly looked the part of a clown. "Where's your makeup?" Sergeant Troy asked.

"Do I need it to unload trucks?" he asked. "What is this anyway?"

"Were you wearing makeup at all tonight?"

"Of course not! You think I dress like a clown all the time? I only wear it during performances. That's plenty!"

Sergeant Troy turned to the girl, Sharon Storm. "Did you come in by the Jericho road tonight?"

She shook her head. "We were supposed to, because the train was going to unload in Nashville at nine-thirty, but then they brought us to a siding out there instead. I hope there weren't too many disappointed kids waiting to see us."

"You *weren't* on the Jericho road?" Troy asked.

"You heard the lady," Willy Madis said. "What's the beef? What you trying to pin on us? Are we supposed to slip you a sawbuck or somethin'?"

His harsh voice had risen enough to attract some of the other workers, who formed a loose ring around us. I started to worry and I could see that Troy was nervous too. His right hand dropped to the butt of his service revolver. But as the circle tightened it was Chesterton who held his ground. He jabbed at the dirt with his walking stick and said, "See here! We're investigating a murder! Take me to your elephants!"

They all stared as if he was crazy, but they parted as Chesterton thrust

his way forward. Sharon hurried after him, steering him toward the large animal enclosure around the back of the big top. She was indeed taking him to see the elephants. I followed.

He stared at them for a long time by torchlight, watching as they tossed their heads this way and that in silence. Finally he turned away, seemingly satisfied. "What did they tell you?" I asked.

"The circus elephant is not expected to make a speech," he responded. "Nor write a book. Yet sometimes he can tell us volumes by his silence."

We joined Sergeant Troy at the car. He had the last word, promising to see Willy Madis again the following day. "Clowns always apply their makeup the same way," Troy told us as he started the car. "Tom O'Neill may not recognize Madis's face but I'm betting he'll remember that clown makeup when he sees it."

"Is there no one else you wish to question?" Chesterton asked.

"Sure. I'll drive out to Jericho in the morning and find out what Clay Waldon has to say about all this. They were on their way to see him when it happened. Maybe he can shed some light on it."

"Waldon, yes," Chesterton agreed. "But you must consider one other possibility as well."

"Such as?"

"That everything Mr. O'Neill told us was a lie."

By the time I reached his hotel in the morning Chesterton had decided to stay over for the day and take the night train. The previous night's events fascinated him, as I suppose they would any writer.

"You missed out in the morning paper," I told him. "Bradshaw's column is all about Mike Osher's death. He doesn't mention your lecture."

Chesterton shrugged his massive shoulders. "I'm not a political subject, after all. I'm a social and religious thinker and a writer. These vocations might almost bar me from politics. But since I'm remaining in your city a few hours more I'd like to be present when Sergeant Troy interviews the political leader out in Jericho."

"Well," I replied uncertainly, "let me see if I can arrange it."

Troy had no objection, apparently sensing that the famous author might offer some helpful theory on the case. "I need all the help I can get on this one," he told me on the telephone. "The railroad just confirmed that

the circus unloaded at the Jericho siding instead of in Nashville. If that's true, O'Neill has to be lying."

He picked us up at Chesterton's hotel and we headed south through the downtown section toward the Jericho road. "It must have happened right around here somewhere," I said as we left the city behind us. Though spring was just beginning, the countryside was lovely. The road passed along the side of a hill where early blossoms were already in evidence.

"Right here," Troy said after a moment, pulling the car off the road. "You can see the tire marks where they went off the embankment."

The overturned car still rested down among the bushes about ten feet below the surface of the dirt road. "They're going to tow it out later this morning," the sergeant told us. "You can climb down if you want but there's nothing to see. I checked it out for clues earlier this morning."

But Chesterton showed little interest in the car itself. He seemed more curious about the road and walked along it for some distance studying the car tracks in the hard-packed dirt. Then he climbed back in the car and we continued into Jericho. It was a tiny village about halfway between Nashville and Franklin, and its closeness to Bethlehem made one wonder if they'd been named by the same early settler to the region.

As I explained to Chesterton, politics in Jericho had always been something special. "It's where the good citizens of Nashville come to do their drinking. Some say there's a bit of gambling out here too, but I wouldn't know about that."

Clay Waldon was a stocky businessman in a starched collar and vest. He maintained an office upstairs over the village's only bank. The nature of his business seemed purposely vague and the sign on the door read only *Waldon Development Corp.* Chesterton was breathing hard from climbing the steep stairs. We paused while he caught his breath and Waldon emerged from the inner office to greet us.

"I've read a great many of your books, Mr. Chesterton," he said. "I especially liked your essays in *What's Wrong With the World.*"

"That book was published in 1910," Chesterton grumbled. "There's a great deal more wrong with the world today."

"Not the least of which was last night's murder," Sergeant Troy added.

"A terribly tragedy," Clay Waldon agreed. "I'd have been at your lecture, Mr. Chesterton, if I hadn't been expecting Osher and O'Neill. But they were due here at 8:30, the same time as your talk."

"What was the purpose of their intended visit?" Troy asked.

"Oh, we'd had a disagreement or two over the speakeasies. This prohibition is bad for everyone and it can only get worse. It's less than two years old and we're having problems."

"What sort of problems?" the sergeant asked. "You can speak freely. I'm investigating a murder, not a speakeasy."

"Well, there was talk of bribery to keep the authorities away. Not your people, Sergeant," he hastened to add. "It seems Mike Osher knew the name of someone with ties to organized crime and he was driving out here last night to tell me about it. This person was supposed to be passing bribes to politicians."

"Any chance the person was Tom O'Neill?"

"I have no way of knowing. Osher simply felt we had to take action to stay in the clear in case there was an investigation."

"And you have no idea who killed him?"

"None whatsoever. I understand it was one of the circus clowns."

"So says O'Neill. We don't know whether to believe him."

Clay Waldon shook his head. "Gangsters don't bother dressing up like clowns. You'd better believe him."

The meeting had been less than satisfactory, it seemed to me, but as we departed Chesterton said, "Mr. Waldon seems to be an honest man. Honest with us, at least."

"He could have killed Osher himself, or had him killed," Troy pointed out.

"Yes, but in that case would he have been so anxious to mention the speakeasies and organized crime?"

"You have a point there," Troy said. When we reached the street he added, "As long as we're here I'm going to look in on the circus again."

We drove the few blocks to the railroad siding where the circus was in full swing. There were black Fords parked everywhere, along with occasional roadsters and sports cars. Though it was a weekday, and nominally a school day, children mixed with the adults touring the midway. Chesterton walked along with his stick, heading once more for the elephants, while Troy and I tracked down the circus clowns.

The other clowns had arrived by now and a half dozen of them waited by the tent flap for their entrance into the big top. "Which one of you is Willy Madis?" Sergeant Troy asked.

A grinning clown with big red spots on his cheeks stepped forward.

He could hardly be described as sad-faced, but I didn't know if that proved anything. While Troy was questioning the clowns about their whereabouts the previous evening, Chesterton joined us. The other five clowns conveniently alibied one another and Willy Madis stuck by his story that the circus had not traveled the Jericho Road.

"Did you ever travel that route?" Chesterton asked suddenly.

"Not this year."

"Other years? Last year?"

Madis nodded. "Sure. Last year the train came in during the day, in the late afternoon. We had a regular circus parade down Main Street, past the newspaper office, and out the Jericho road. It was great publicity for the show. They told us we'd have a parade again this year, but the train brought us on out here."

The girl we'd met the previous night, Sharon Storm, appeared from the big top in her spangled tights. "Come on, clowns—the kids are waiting," she said. Then she saw us and came over. "More questions, Sergeant?"

"Just checking on the clowns, ma'am."

"Come back after the show. We're all working now."

"I have a question about the elephants," Chesterton said as she started to turn away. "They've been quiet while I've observed them. What causes them to trumpet?"

"Oh, the trainer usually does that. Gets them to curl their trunks or stand on their hind legs. It's great for performances, and in parades. Otherwise they're generally quiet unless they're alarmed by something."

As we walked back to the car I said, "You're concerned about the elephants."

His eyes twinkled. "You might even say I'm concerned about the curious behavior of the elephants in the nighttime."

"Because they did nothing?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Foxx. Because, according to O'Neill's account, they were trumpeting as they paraded along the Jericho road."

We drove back into Nashville shortly after two. Chesterton suggested we stop at the hospital to visit Tom O'Neill and Sergeant Troy readily agreed. I could see their minds were working together. If the elephants were parading down the Jericho road in darkness, without any spectators,

they would have marched in silence. There would have been no reason for the trainer to have them trumpet or perform.

When we reached the hospital and started up to O'Neill's room I said, "The circus people were telling the truth. The train unloaded at the siding. The elephants wouldn't have trumpeted while parading along a deserted road at night."

"Quite correct," Chesterton agreed. "I also inspected the road where we stopped this morning. It's quite doubtful that a parade of circus animals could have passed that way without leaving some traces, but there was nothing to indicate their passage. There is no doubt in my mind. The circus was not on the Jericho road last night. The railroad and the circus people are telling the truth."

"Then Tom O'Neill lied about the clown killing Mike Osher."

Chesterton merely smiled. "On the contrary, it proves O'Neill told the truth."

"But—"

We were at O'Neill's door now and I could see the political reporter, Harvey Bradshaw, at his bedside. Bradshaw was taking notes while he interviewed the wounded man. Chesterton raised his walking stick and pointed dramatically. "*There* is your killer!"

Bradshaw stood up, backing against the wall. His face went pale. "What—what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about underworld connections, Mr. Bradshaw, and political bribery. We heard this morning that Mr. Osher was on his way to give Mr. Waldon the name of someone with ties to organized crime, someone who was passing along bribe money to local officials. What better person than a political reporter, always on the scene and above—or below—suspicion?"

"I was at your lecture last night," Bradshaw pointed out. "How could I—?"

"I wondered about that myself," Chesterton admitted. "What would bring a political reporter out to hear an old guffer like me talk about literature and society? Could it have been a way of establishing an alibi? Then I remembered that you hadn't been present with the rest of the press before my lecture. You were a late arrival. I started speaking at 8:30, the exact time Osher and O'Neill were due in Jericho. Therefore the attack on them—forcing their car off the road and later shooting

them—took place shortly before 8:30. That's where you were while I was meeting the rest of the press."

"But why should O'Neill tell us this story about the circus parade?" I asked.

"Because it was true, to the best of his knowledge. Bradshaw here forced their car off the road, perhaps hoping it would burst into flames and kill them both. When that didn't happen, he had an alternate scheme. He quickly applied clown makeup to his face in the car and slipped a baggy clown costume over his own clothes. Then he drove by the wreck with the sounds of a circus parade playing out the window of his car."

"Sounds from what?" Troy asked.

"From a dictaphone recording he made last year. Unless he's destroyed it, you'll probably find the wax cylinder in his office at the newspaper. The sounds O'Neill described were those of a circus parade in full performance—the calliope playing, the elephants trumpeting. Those were not the sounds of a circus troupe moving through the night without an audience. But one of the performers told us the circus did parade through Nashville last year, and past the newspaper office. Bradshaw had only to hang his microphone out the window to make his recording."

"But why?" I asked. "Why go to all that trouble?"

"The alibi again. The circus was scheduled to travel the Jericho road last evening. Bradshaw remembered the wax recording he'd made a year earlier and decided to use it if necessary. He had a battery-powered dictaphone and a loudspeaker in the car. He circled around, drove back to the wreck in his clown costume, and played the wax recording. He killed Osher and carefully wounded O'Neill here in the shoulder so he'd live to tell the circus story to the authorities. I imagine it was Bradshaw who tipped off the police, so O'Neill wouldn't bleed to death before he could tell the story. Then Bradshaw hurried back to my lecture, assuming the real parade was on its way out the Jericho road. A perfect alibi. Except that O'Neill could hardly have made up such a story if it hadn't been true."

On the bed, the wounded man stirred. "Even if that's all true, the killer could have been anyone. Why do you say it's Bradshaw?"

"He's here with you, for one thing. He had to make certain you didn't see through his clown makeup, and make certain Mr. Osher didn't mention his name before he died. Beyond that, there's the fact that the newspaper office would be most likely to know of the circus's plan to

parade out the Jericho road last night. They had paraded past the newspaper office last year, giving someone there the best opportunity to record the sounds. And Bradshaw had a dictaphone. Remember, Foxx? He told us he had to go back to his office and dictate the column into his machine. And I've already pointed out a political reporter's advantage in acting as a go-between for politicians and your American mobsters. There is one other thing too—the speck of red grease on my hand after I met Mr. Bradshaw last night. It was red greasepaint from his clown makeup. I must have shaken hands when we met and picked up that smear then.”

“Well, Bradshaw?” Troy asked the reporter.

And then Harvey Bradshaw did an odd thing. He started to sob.

Chesterton placed an arm on his shoulder and motioned us away. They walked down the hospital corridor together, talking quietly, and I never knew what was said. When they came back the reporter told Sergeant Troy he was ready to go with him.

I don't think Chesterton ever seemed more like his little Essex priest Father Brown than he did at that moment.

That evening at the railway station I told him, “I suppose this business will make a good chapter for your book.”

“Oh, I hardly think so,” he replied. “Though I may make some mention of the elephants. You can write up the rest of it if you wish.”

“I might do that someday,” I agreed. “I'd call it *The Phantom Circus*.”

Chesterton shook his head as he boarded the train. “You're forgetting these travelers were attacked on the road to Jericho. I would call it *The Bad Samaritan*.”



Mrs. Grimsley's uncle had returned from Africa with the diamonds years before . . .

DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

by
CAROL
MYERS
MARTIN



"If I could find my diamonds I wouldn't have to stay here," Mrs. Grimsly said.

I was down on my hands and knees tryin' to reach the ball of yarn that had slipped out of her poor half-paralyzed hand again. As usual, it had rolled way under the bed.

I stretched as far as I could and finally got a grip on it, backed out from under the bed, and stood up. Mrs. Grimsly was starin' off in space, that

look in her eyes. She'd forgotten about her crocheting. I was glad. They said it was good therapy for her to use that hand all she could and I reckon it was, but it made my own hands—and my heart—ache to see her strugglin' with that slippery old hook and yarn she couldn't make do what she wanted.

I put the ball of yarn back in the wicker workbasket beside her chair and gently took the tangled wool she'd been tusslin' with out of her hands, stuck the hook in it, and put it beside the basket.

"I wish you could find your diamonds, Granny," I told her. I wish you had some diamonds *to* find, I said to myself.

"Oh, you mustn't misunderstand!" Mrs. Grimsly's pretty blue eyes got worried. She was always afraid of makin' somebody mad or hurtin' their feelin's. "This is a lovely place, the nicest nursing home I've ever seen. It's just that I'd rather be in my own home."

"Well, sure you would, Granny." I patted her shoulder. "Anybody would."

"I'm glad you understand," Mrs. Grimsly sighed. "It's so wrong of me to complain when Selena's been so kind and generous."

I didn't say anything. But I'd never have used them two words to describe Selena.

She was Mrs. Grimsly's great-niece and only livin' blood kin and I reckon she was doin' her duty by her aunt. But if she was kind she'd let the old lady stay in her own home, inconvenient and dilapidated as it was, and hire someone to stay with her. As for generous, shoot! She could pay Mrs. Grimsly's bills at the nursin' home, big as they were, out of her small change. She had that kind of money.

Selena was in real estate—head of her own company, in fact, which had offices all over the state. Some said Selena was one of the richest women in the state. I didn't know if she was, but I was sure she *would* be.

Selena was shrewd and slick, which isn't necessarily bad, but she was tough and hard along with it. Cold. Calculatin'.

"My uncle brought them from Africa," Mrs. Grimsly said softly, that faroff look still in her eyes.

I smiled to myself. I'd figured this was comin'. Mrs. Grimsly was goin' to tell her story again.

I sat down on the edge of her bed, keepin' one eye on the door in case my boss-lady came by, and pretended to listen like I always did. I don't

know how many times she'd told it, but I always tried to look like I was hearin' it for the first time. What did it hurt? I was due a break anyway, it made Mrs. Grimsly happy, and it was kind of interestin'.

I loved the way Mrs. Grimsly talked too. Her English was always so proper and she used funny big words like she was readin' out of a book, but they came natural to her.

Since I knew the story by heart, I could nod and smile and look sad at all the right times and still be thinkin' my own thoughts or not thinkin' at all, while Mrs. Grimsly talked about the young man who was so different from the rest of his family.

They were farmers and had worked the same land generation after generation practically, ever since the first white man had set foot in that region.

But this fellow—Jonas was his name—had a yen for the sea. The ocean was all he ever talked about and what it must be like to sail all over the world and see other countries and other people.

Finally, one spring day when he was twenty-one Jonas just walked away, leavin' the plow in the field with the horses still hitched to it. (Sometimes, I noticed, it was a summer day and he left them shorthanded at wheat harvest. Once or twice it was in the fall and he'd set a foamin' bucket of milk on the kitchen table and kissed his mother before he left.)

However it was, it quite broke his mother's heart and so infuriated his father that he would never allow his son's name to be spoken in his presence again.

One of the registered nurses who gave medications passed the door in her trim white uniform.

That's what I had wanted to be, a real nurse. But my grades weren't good enough. I couldn't get into trainin'. I was real disappointed by that, but I decided to do the next best thing and get a job at the nursin' home.

That was fifteen years ago. I liked the job. I loved all my old people. They were so sweet, most of them, and them that weren't, well, maybe they had their reasons.

The balls of yarn in Mrs. Grimsly's basket were so pretty, all different colors, and shades of the same colors.

The first thing Mrs. Grimsly'd asked me to do for her when she came to the nursin' home was to help her roll the dozen skeins of yarn she'd brought with her into balls. I was tryin' to get one started by waddin' the

yarn in the palm of my hand and windin' the rest around it. Mrs. Grimsly like to've had a fit when she saw the mess I was makin'.

"Land, child," she said, "didn't you ever save string?"

Then she smiled. "No, I don't suppose you ever did. Things don't come from the store wrapped in brown paper and tied with cotton string any more, do they?"

She showed me how to start with a piece of cardboard or a scrap of paper and wind the yarn around it till you had a nice neat ball.

"In time—" Mrs. Grimsly was finishin' up the story now "—Jonas came back to the farm." Apparently he'd seen and done all the things he wanted to so passionately. "And all he brought back with him was a headful of stories and a handful of rough uncut diamonds.

"He was always vague about how he got those stones. He smuggled them into this country concealed, somehow, about his person." She took a long breath and tears filled her eyes. "They stayed in the family for all those years since, and now I've lost them." She shook her head. "I put them in a safe place, I know I did. But then I had the stroke and since then I haven't been able to remember where." She started to cry and I went over and put my arm around her.

"Oh, now, Granny," I said as cheerful as I could though I felt like cryin' myself, "it'll come back to you. Just like the use is comin' back to your hand." I gave her a squeeze and said, "What would—will—you do with 'em when you find 'em?"

Just like I'd hoped, Mrs. Grimsly stopped cryin' and her face brightened up. "I'll sell one or two of them and buy a nice little house with all the conveniences, down South someplace where it's warm all the time. I'd have to hire a companion, of course. I know I can't live alone any more."

"That sounds mighty nice," I said. "Could I put in for the job?"

"Well, of course, dear, I couldn't think of anyone I'd rather have. Would you come, really?" -

"Sure would!" Boy, would I! 'Course, I knew all this was just what Mama used to call a pipedream. Mrs. Grimsly didn't have no diamonds and I'd never get to leave this little town where I'd lived all my life and see what the rest of the world looked like. But it don't hurt to dream sometimes.

"Surely, you don't believe a word of that!"

It was Selena, of course. Nobody else could, or would, talk that hateful. She'd been standin' in the door listenin'.

She glared at me and then whirled around to her aunt. "That was just another one of the old sailor's tales and you know it," she snapped. "Diamonds indeed!"

I didn't much care what Selena said to me, but hearin' her talk that way to that sweet old lady made me want to slap her painted face. That woman spent a fortune on clothes and makeup. I knew. I liked to stop at the magazine rack at the grocery store, so I kept up with the latest in fashions and cosmetics. Only difference was, Selena could afford to buy them.

Mrs. Grimsly didn't seem upset though. I guess she was used to Selena's ways. "It is true, Selena," she said with a little laugh. "Everyone in the family saw those jewels. They didn't *look* like jewels, of course, not being polished—they looked like little grey rocks."

"That's exactly what they were," Selena snapped.

"Selena, you know better," Mrs. Grimsly scolded. "Wasn't it you—yes, it was you!—who drove me to that jeweler's in town to get a professional opinion. I can't recall the man's name but I know he said they were genuine and very valuable. You heard what he said. He warned me I was taking a big risk keeping them at home and he offered to recommend a reputable buyer."

"Oh, nonsense." Selena laughed and turned to me. "Her mind is completely gone, you can see that."

Just like she couldn't hear her!

I held my tongue. I thought plenty but I didn't want to talk that way in front of Mrs. Grimsly.

Thank goodness Mrs. Grimsly changed the subject.

"Selena," she said, "I've decided to sell my house. It's no good to me any more and I need the money. Will you handle it for me?"

"No," Selena said—I think she shocked her own self, soundin' so loud and cross. "I mean," she went on, more reasonable, "I don't think it's the right time to sell, Auntie. The house will increase in value over the next few years. You should wait a while."

"Well, you should know, dear. But I may not have many years left."

"Oh, you have a lot of years left," Selena said, not soundin' very happy about it.

I looked at my watch. I hated to leave Mrs. Grimsly alone with Selena but my shift was over. I kissed her soft, wrinkled cheek.

"See you tomorrow, Granny."

Trust Selena to jump at that. "Has she adopted you?" she asked, sarcastic.

Mrs. Grimsly spoke up for me.

"This girl's been mighty nice to me since I came here," she said, patten' my hand. "She doesn't have a grandmother and I don't have a granddaughter, so we kind of adopted each other."

I nodded to Selena and left. All the way down the hall I could feel her eyes borin' into my back.

It was a beautiful night with a big bright full moon but I couldn't enjoy it. I was so mad I could've chewed nails and spit rust.

What was the matter with that woman? What did she care if her poor old aunt believed she had a handful of diamonds hid away somewhere? Or if I believed it? Then I got to wonderin'. Was that what really bothered her? That *I* might believe it?

I got in my car and started home.

Somethin' else was funny. Selena bein' so dead against Mrs. Grimsly sellin' her house. It would be more like her to jump at the idea. It would mean a big commission for her and even I knew that tumbledown old house wasn't gonna increase in value. It was too far gone.

Then it hit me like a hammer. Mrs. Grimsly did have a fortune in diamonds hid somewhere in that old house! And Selena knew it! That's why she'd moved Mrs. Grimsly out—so she could search for 'em—and why she couldn't let the house be sold and risk some *stranger* findin' 'em.

I turned the car around.

Pretty quick I was on the bumpy dirt road that went out past the Grimsly place. Soon my headlights picked up the name on a mailbox. Trees almost hid the house. I pulled around back and got out.

The old house looked spooky in the moonlight, its windows boarded up, the chimney broken, but I'm not scared of dead folks. It's the livin' ones you got to watch.

I found a low window and tugged at the plyboard coverin' it. The nails pulled out of the rotten weatherboard so sudden I almost fell backwards.

I raised the window and climbed in. I had a flashlight in my pocketbook.

I put it on and saw I was in the kitchen. There was an oil lamp on the table with a box of wooden matches beside it.

I lit the lamp and looked around. The room was a mess. Everything had been dumped on the floor—coffee, sugar, salt, even the ashes out of the wood cookstove.

Somebody had sure been searchin' for somethin'.

I took the lamp into the next room, the only other room Mrs. Grimsly'd told me she'd used since her husband died—her bedroom. Everything that could be had been dumped in there too—dresser drawers, dustin' powder, cold cream. The mattress on the bed had been cut open and the stuffin' pulled out. Several beautiful patchwork quilts had been slashed to ribbons. It made me sick.

I smelled stale cigarette smoke in the air. Then I saw an ashtray on the dresser. It was overflowin' and every butt was smeared with this new shade of lipstick Selena wears.

Well, I decided I might as well give up. If Selena hadn't found them stones after a search like this they for certain sure weren't there.

I thought about checkin' the other rooms but there were twelve or fourteen of 'em. Mrs. Grimsly had told me her family had lived there for six generations and none of 'em ever threw anything away. It'd take weeks to sort through all that stuff.

Besides, I was gettin' a little shaky.

Thinkin' back, I realized Selena'd only overheard her aunt and me talkin' about sellin' the diamonds and goin' away. She might think Mrs. Grimsly'd suddenly remembered where they were and told me.

Selena must have suspicioned I was gettin' thick with her aunt for a lowdown reason. Somebody like Selena don't understand you can love somebody like I loved Mrs. Grimsly without bein' after somethin'.

If she came in and caught me!

I sure hated to see her get away with her dirty trick though.

I held up the lamp and took a last look around.

I hadn't noticed the wicker workbasket before. It was just like the one Mrs. Grimsly had at the nursin' home. It must've been settin' on the little table by the old rockin' chair.

It had been dumped on the floor like everything else and the pretty balls of yarn had rolled everywhere.

It hurt me to see 'em gettin' dirty and tangled. I stooped down and

started pickin' 'em up. Mrs. Grimsly fixed these when she was able to do it herself, I was thinkin'. Wonder how she got these ones started.

Then I remembered how she showed me to start one and I had an idea.

I took up a big dark green ball and began. The yarn fell in a tangle on the floor, twistin' and turnin' like a skinny green snake—till I felt somethin' hard and my skin started pricklin'.

I jerked the rest of that yarn off but it took forever. Finally, I had it in my hand. Just a little old grey rock. It didn't look like much. But hadn't Mrs. Grimsly said that's what uncut diamonds looked like?

I found a grocery bag in the kitchen and stuffed all the balls of yarn I could find in it. I was laughin' and cryin' like somebody crazy and hollerin', "Oh, Selena—slick, sly Selena! The joke's on you, after all!"

I feel kind of silly, people seein' me strollin' home from the store along an avenue of palm trees, carryin' a tote bag full of wool yarn. But that's what Granny wants, and these days what Granny wants she gets.

Selena can't fault me callin' her Granny now. It's official. She adopted me. I didn't know you could adopt a grown person but that's what Granny wanted.

She deeded the old house to Selena.

"I mustn't leave Selena without anything when she's been so kind," she said. "She'll sell the house when the time's right and make herself a lot of money. Selena's very shrewd."



A black and white illustration showing a man in a wheelchair on the right, looking towards a woman on the left. The woman is kneeling on the ground, her hands clasped in prayer, and her head bowed. She is wearing a long, dark, patterned dress. The man is seated in a simple wheelchair with large spoked wheels. He is wearing a light-colored shirt and dark trousers. In the background, there is a window with a cross visible outside, and some furniture, including a table and a chair. The style is a simple line drawing with cross-hatching for shading.

"Hold it, punk," Wes snapped, "that's mine, not yours!"

The guy spun around, startled by the voice, still clutching the TV. In that instant Wes snapped his picture, the flashbulb plunging the room into momentary brilliant light. The subject of the picture was a kid about sixteen in a dark turtleneck sweater and a suede jacket. "Hey," the kid gasped, setting the television down, "I came in here by mistake, Mister. I was supposed to get a TV from a friend's house and—"

"Shut up," Wes cut in. Wes was twenty-seven, paralyzed from the waist down since a shooting at a convenience store. He now made his living from his home as a phone salesman. "Get your hands up," he ordered. The kid obeyed. The room was dark, too dark for him to see that Wes had no weapon.

"It was a mistake," the kid repeated, his hands up and shaking.

"Don't lie, you hear me?"

"Look, my dad's sick and we need money," he said then, halfheartedly, knowing he wouldn't be believed—and he wasn't.

"You're a lousy thief," Wes told him. "I bet you're the same one who's burglarized four houses on this street in the past month."

The kid's eyes widened. He licked his dry lips.

"O.K.," he said, "I hit a couple of places. Look, I'm sorry—" In the dim light he could make out that the man was in a wheelchair, but he couldn't tell what he held in his hand. He presumed it was a gun. "I didn't mean to rip off a crippled guy like you."

"Don't talk about my handicap, punk," Wes said bitterly. "Get down on your belly, now!"

The kid dropped to his knees, then got down all the way. Perspiration ran down his face as the man in the wheelchair drew closer. "Hands behind your back," Wes barked.

"What're you gonna do?" the kid asked.

"I said hands behind your back!" Wes shouted. The kid was afraid not to, so he obliged. In a few deft moves, Wes roped his wrists, then his ankles. When the burglar was tied hand and foot, Wes flipped on the lights.

"As you see," he pointed out, "I have no gun. I bluffed you."

The kid stared at him, wild-eyed. He jerked at his bonds but they were hopelessly knotted and tight. Right now his parents thought he was out on a date with his girl friend. He was about due home now, but instead he was trapped by an insane crippled guy who was grinning maliciously at him.

Wes reached down, pulled out the kid's wallet, and looked through it. "Jeff Denison. Your father's into computers. Ah, a nice address too. How come you rip off a crummy neighborhood like this, you overprivileged little creep?"

"What're you going to do?" Denison whispered. His voice was hoarse with fear. He'd been in some tight scrapes in his life, but nothing his dad couldn't handle by paying off a store where he'd done some shoplifting or soft-soaping the school authorities after some vandalism. Even the petty thefts last year hadn't gotten him into any real trouble. Now, though, he was at the mercy of a madman.

"I'm not *sure* what I'm going to do," Wes said. "See, I really hate punks like you. When I was twenty, a dirty little criminal like you was the cause of me getting a bullet in my spine. Now I'm stuck in this chair for life. So when I see somebody like you I get violent."

"Look, Mister, I never shot nobody—"

"Not yet you haven't. A few more years and you'll probably work up to that."

"No, look, please—"

"I guess what I'll do is shove you into the crawl space under the house for a few days, let you get to meet the spiders and rats that live under there."

"You can't do that—that's ag-against the law," the kid stammered.

"What do I care?"

"I'll scream my head off. It's a crowded neighborhood."

Wes grinned. "My two closest neighbors are deaf. Anyway, I'll gag you. Be easy to do."

"You're crazy—you're a nut—" Denison croaked.

"You shouldn't have come into my house." Wes leaned back in his chair. "That's the chance you take when you break into a strange house. The people living there might not be kindly folks. They might even be worse than you, hey?" He laughed. "I think I'll leave you down in the crawl space about a week, then I'll figure out what to do with you after that."

"Listen—please don't. Gimme a break, will you?"

Wes wheeled over to a shelf and got a tape recorder. "I'll give you a break under one condition. You talk about every burglary you've done in this neighborhood."

"O.K., O.K.," Denison agreed quickly.

In a shaky voice he told about breaking into four houses in the neighborhood, how he took old Mrs. Kramer's portable black-and-white TV and silverware and jewelry from the Levines, the stereo equipment Lonnie Jones had saved all year to buy and the tiny engagement ring Jessie Mae Dolan had just received from her boyfriend. It came to about a thousand dollars' worth of stuff and it was all gone, sold to buy motorcycle accessories, records, and fancy dates with his girl friend. After that he described a crime spree that even the most lenient judge would believe deserved some time behind the walls, especially considering how many times things had been smoothed over before.

"What're you gonna do now?" the kid asked when Wes turned off the recorder and pulled out the cassette.

"I'm putting this nice glossy picture of you stealing my TV with your taped confession. I'm putting them both in a safe place, not around here. If you report to Pop's Apartment Cleaning Service every day after school for two hours of work until you've paid off the people you stole from, I'll destroy the evidence. If not, the cops get it."

"Who's Pop?"

Wes eyed him before he answered.

"A tough old geezer who cleans apartments. He'll make you scrub and clean until your skin looks like a prune and your joints ache. When you've earned enough to pay your victims you send it anonymously, signed Guilty Conscience. And you better believe I'll be checking on you every inch of the way."

Jeff Denison took a deep breath. He couldn't stand the thought of going to jail and mixing with tough, dirty criminals. He was downright scared of the prospect and he knew nobody could get him off the hook with the kind of evidence Wes had.

He sighed and said, "It's a deal."

"Don't cross me, punk, or, believe me, you'll do time. And then afterwards I'll find you and you'll do more time, *on my terms*."

Jeff nodded, thoroughly frightened. He'd never seen eyes like Wes Moriarty's. The strange, tough crippled man seemed capable of the worst kind of vengeance.

"I won't cross you," he said. "I'll be at that place tomorrow after school, I swear it."

Wes shoved the address of Pop's Apartment Cleaning Service into the kid's pocket, gave him back his wallet, and released him.

Jeff Denison left quickly, but he meant to keep the bargain. He was terrified not to.

Wes was grinning when he picked up the phone in the morning.

"Pop," he said. "I got you a helper for a few months. Yeah, a kid who needs a lot of hard work and your style of badgering so he learns a good lesson. Give him the meanest, dirtiest jobs you got so he gets the message. This is a kid somebody's got to stop before he ends up sticking up a store when he's twenty and getting a cop's bullet in the spine like I did."



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Fortune cookies can be uncannily accurate . . .

THE LAUNCHING OF SUELLEN SINGLETON

by
TONITA S.
GARDNER



It was a fortune-cookie message that finally convinced me: *It's time for a change.*

Ten years out of State U. and all I had to show for it were a dumpsy furnished apartment, a dead-end job in a tacky office, and a few thousand dollars in the Walla-Walla Savings and Loan.

Time for a change? A whole slew of changes!

Within a week I'd sublet my apartment, closed out my bank account,

and was jetting to New York. On the plane I took stock of myself: my I.Q. could get me into Mensa, my looks could get me nowhere.

Six weeks later not only had I switched from glasses to contacts but I'd had my nose bobbed, my teeth capped, and my hair dyed the same shade as the bubbles in the bottle of Dom Perignon I'd bought to celebrate the new me.

The launching of Suellen Singleton.

Launched but broke. Which meant a temporary job in an even more tacky office than the one I'd left behind in Walla-Walla.

To offset the dullness of my employment I enrolled in a Nineteenth Century Novels course at the New School.

The instructor, an expatriate Englishman named Denis Aylesworth, talked about Little Nell but kept looking at me. I was flattered. Denis was a fascinating man with an interesting mind. When the class was over he asked me out for a cup of coffee.

We started talking about Dickens but soon switched to talking about Denis. I learned that he'd published five novels and was waiting for his big break.

We began to see each other regularly and continued after the semester had ended. Then one day Denis phoned to tell me his latest book had been sold to the movies, and invited me to celebrate with him.

We went to a small Chinese restaurant in the Village. Denis was so euphoric he put soy sauce in his tea instead of sugar—and never noticed the difference. I could hardly blame him. Even so, I was totally surprised when he asked me to marry him.

The waiter brought the bill and a couple of fortune cookies.

We broke them open. Denis's was empty. "See," he said, "my life will be empty without you." He pointed to my message. "What's it say, luv?"

I'd forgotten to wear my contacts and couldn't see such small print. I handed it to Denis.

"*Opportunity knocks but once*," he read aloud. "And I'm an opportunity no woman should resist." He smiled his crooked smile. "Especially *you*, Suellen. Let's find a judge and tie the knot."

"Well—" I hesitated. Denis did have a sense of humor to balance out the blandness of his features and the thickness of his paunch. And he *was* the right age: 41 to my 29-going-on-32. And now that his book had sold to the movies Denis had another virtue many women would find irresistible: money.

I was not averse to a bulging bank account. The only flaw was that, sweet as he seemed and brilliant as his mind, I didn't love him.

He sipped his Oolong tea. "Is it yes, Suellen?"

Some fast mental calculations: the rent on my cell-sized studio was due, my Master Charge was in arrears, and if I typed up one more invoice for Peerless Pest Control while a family of mice frolicked beneath the floorboards they'd carry me out of my one-girl office in a straightjacket.

I squinted at the message again—still couldn't see it.

"*Opportunity knocks but once*," Denis repeated.

Suddenly I could have kicked myself for not opening the door. I slipped the message into my pocket. "All right," I said. "I'll marry you."

Of course I could have changed my mind when I discovered that the message actually read *Marry in haste, repent at leisure*. But when I confronted Denis with it and he confessed that it was the best fiction he'd ever invented I laughed along with him and agreed there was no turning back.

At first, things were as smooth as Denis's prose style. We saw all the latest plays, discussed the newest books, and played Scrabble several times a week. But little by little Denis began to change. The problem was one I could hardly have foreseen. The more money my husband made, the more he became afraid of catching cold. He began to see germs lurking everywhere, ready to pounce on him and do him in. I knew his fear had turned into a phobia when he insisted that I sterilize the Scrabble tiles before he'd play. It got so bad that by our first anniversary I was ready to hire a lawyer.

But then, lunching with a friend at a Cantonese restaurant, I received a hopeful message: *This too shall pass*.

That night Denis came down with a full-blown attack: runny nose, wrenching cough, the works. What happened next was his own fault. Although the cold turned into pneumonia, he refused to go to the hospital. "There are too many germs in those places," he said.

By the following morning he'd taken a turn for the worse. As I reached for the bedside phone to call the doctor, Denis croaked at me, "Did you wash your hands?"

Humoring him, I hurried from the room, the fortune-cookie message echoing in my brain: *This too shall pass*.

Did *This too* mean Denis?

Putting the thought from my mind, I not only washed my hands but

I took a nice hot shower and shampooed my hair for good measure. I also replaced my contaminated nailpolish with fresh color and brushed my teeth. By the time I put in the call to the doctor I was free of germs and Denis was free at last.

As I adjusted to widowhood I had to admit that fortune cookies can be uncannily, eerily accurate. I vowed that from then on, before making any major decisions, I'd check them out with my highly unorthodox but valid system.

To sweeten my loss of Denis I was left with a six-figure inheritance.

But even six figures don't go far when you're living off the interest and not the principle. And a year later, what with inflation, I was living off the principle as well.

A message in a fortune cookie—*A fool and his money are soon parted*—warned of imminent financial peril.

Hoping to recoup with some wise investments, I found myself in a staid Madison Avenue brokerage house. The senior partner, Walter Prendergast IV, sized up my chic clothes and ladylike demeanor and invited me into his luxurious office to discuss blue chips and municipal bonds.

I could tell Mr. Prendergast's interest went beyond filling my empty portfolio, yet I wasn't immune to his kind attention. His striped silk foulard and reassuring air bespoke strength and stability. I agreed to have dinner with him.

Soon he was calling me every day and I was seeing him several times a week. Walter, in his 50s, was not the handsomest man I'd ever met. Completely bald, he had little warts sprouting on his head instead of hair. Luckily he was quite tall—at least 6' 6"—so I was usually able to avoid looking at his unappetizing dome. In his favor were a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, impeccable social credentials, and no interest in germs.

When Walter asked me to marry him I can't say I was anxious to accept. Stalling, I suggested that I'd give him my answer that night and that I had a craving for Chinese food.

As soon as the waiter cleared away the remains of our Moo Shu Pork, I broke open my fortune cookie.

Don't judge a book by its cover.

I looked at Walter. My, he was ugly! But he was also steady, protective,

dependable. He reached for my hand. "I want to make you happy, my dear. Won't you give me that opportunity?"

While I was making up my mind, he popped a diamond ring on my finger. The diamond was huge. "If you want it engraved, bring it to Tiffany's," he said. "And while you're there you can order our wedding announcements."

As the diamond winked invitingly at me, I knew that never again would I judge a book by its cover. The next day, I brought the ring to Tiffany's and ordered the announcements.

Both were splendidly engraved.

We settled into a Fifth Avenue penthouse and within six months—with Walter's beaming approval—I established a reputation as an excellent hostess and patron of the arts. But suddenly the Dow Jones dropped and just as suddenly Walter announced that our social activities would have to cease.

Assuming it was temporary, I didn't mind. But then Walter began monitoring my charge accounts and checking my grocery bills. To please him, I clipped food coupons from the newspapers and bought clothes off the sale racks. But it wasn't enough. As Walter continued to badger me about my so-called extravagance, I realized that my wealthy husband was a closet miser. His true colors were emerging like a new crop of warts on his head. Worst of all, I realized that *Don't judge a book by its cover* could apply not to Walter's looks but to the phony façade he'd presented to me during our courtship.

Again, the message had been right on the mark. My fault that I wasn't shrewd enough to decipher it.

The final indignity came one weekend when Walter scolded me for throwing out some scraps of soap. In a fit of anger I scooped them from the garbage and tossed them into the bathtub before stalking off to a solitary dinner at a Széchuan restaurant.

When, after dinner, my fortune cookie told me *You will inherit a great deal of money* I dismissed it as a vague promise for the future—a future, I hoped, without Walter—and sat back and pictured him at home, ready to take his Sunday-night bath so he could relax with the *Times* he'd picked up from the corner trashcan. I pictured him getting into the tub and then my imagination drew a blank. Surely he'd watch his step and not put his big feet on the slippery scraps of soap, lose his footing, and crack his warty skull against a protruding towel bar? And surely he wouldn't lose

consciousness and sink to the bottom of the tub while the water ran on relentlessly.

With the reading of the will, my holdings increased from six to seven figures. Did that extra zero bring me happiness? Of course. Except that one thing was missing: someone to share it with. Perhaps, I told myself, I was ready for a new romance. But how could I be certain that I'd have better luck than the last time—and the time before that?

A fortune-cookie message, *If at first you don't succeed, try try again*, gave me the necessary encouragement. As did the smiling face of the man at the next table.

Niko.

A well built Adonis in his 30s, Niko had curly black hair, a beautiful thick moustache, and a way of looking at me that made me think of satin sheets and undulating waterbeds.

Niko, I subsequently learned, was a man of many talents. He spoke several languages, was a champion discus thrower, and had a flair for figure-drawing, specializing in rather elderly overblown nudes. The one thing Niko lacked was money. Yet he was always bringing me little gifts: a single long-stemmed rose, a lace-edged handkerchief, a bottle of diet Seven-Up. The more I got to know him, the more enchanted I became. I couldn't wait till he asked me to marry him.

Once he did, I had a dreadful moment when a fortune cookie warned me to *Beware of Greeks bearing gifts*. Niko was Greek.

I showed him the message. "I can't marry you with this hanging over my head," I said.

He looked as if I'd slapped him, then slowly broke into a dazzling smile. "The solution is simple, my darling. Our marriage will make me an American citizen."

I sighed with relief—and made Niko promise that until we said "I do" he would bring me no more presents.

He kept his word.

Married, we lived a life that most people can only dream about. We went on safari in Africa, we skied in Switzerland, and once, feeling wickedly trendy, we went to a Tupperware demonstration in Brooklyn.

To keep Niko busy between jaunts, I bought him a chain of souvlaki stands. The business did so well that soon Niko was paying more in taxes

than he'd ever earned in his life. But he always had time for me and we remained as happy as newlyweds.

Until the day that Niko made his fateful announcement: "I have a surprise for you, my darling"—and hurried me off to the airport without providing a clue. Never suspecting what he had in mind, I thought of rare orchids flown in from Hawaii or fresh caviar from wherever fresh caviar is obtained these days.

When a thick-set woman in her 60s bounded up to us and grabbed Niko in a bone-crunching hug I began to feel uneasy.

"Surprise," said Niko. "This is my mama!"

He didn't have to tell me. If ever a mother and son resembled one another it was Niko and the senior Mrs. Copolopoloulis. But *his* moustache was trimmed.

Mama regarded me with an icy glare. "Who's this?"

"My wife," said Niko, more apologetic about it than I would have liked.

"Who needs her?" said Mama and turned her back on me.

From then on Niko became a cringing, sniveling little boy. When I protested, he looked hurt. "Please be nice to her," he said. "She's not well." He patted his heart to indicate the source of Mama's affliction.

Two weeks later I asked him how long his mother planned to stay with us.

"It's up to her," he said. "She's the boss."

As if to emphasize her son's words, Mama set up a cot for Niko in her bedroom. "Why should *you* have him all the time?" she asked me.

Yes, Mrs. Copolopoloulis hated me and made no secret of it. I thought of the warning I'd received before the wedding: *Beware of Greeks bearing gifts*. If only I'd known that the gift would be Mama. What galled me most was the spineless way Niko let her get away with her outrageous behavior. I soon lost all respect for him and whatever love I'd felt along with it.

Wondering if there was some way I could get back the money I'd invested in his business, I told Niko it was either Mama or me.

"Let's talk it over," he said.

"All right," I agreed. "But not here. I'll meet you at the Rice Garden at seven."

When Niko didn't show up, I ordered dinner and ate by myself.

I was about to check out my fortune cookie when I walked Niko with

Mama in tow. Or, to be precise, in walked Mama with Niko trailing like an empty caboose. I was so angry I told the waiter to put extra seasoning in their food, figuring it would raise Mama's blood pressure and make Niko gag. After waiting until they were served, I turned to my husband.

"Niko, it's all over between us."

"Good," said Mama. "Now we can buy our own condominium."

Niko jumped up, his face turning a deep purplish red. He began to wave his arms in my direction.

Was he choosing me instead of Mama? I no longer cared. I looked my unopened fortune cookie and suddenly its message was as clear to me as if I'd seen it: *You can kill two birds with one stone.*

Niko's eyes began to bulge and I realized that instead of being upset about losing me, he was choking on a piece of beef bok choy.

If I grabbed him around the middle and squeezed hard, it would dislodge the food in his throat. But would Mama let me do it? I could just imagine her pushing me away and shrieking at me, "Take your hands off my boy!"

It was total confusion—waiters, customers, and a blind man who'd been paying for a take-out order all gathered around to help but they got in each other's way instead.

A doctor was summoned, but Niko was beyond being saved. Hearing the pronouncement, Mama gave a loud keening wail and, clutching her chest, fell onto Niko's prostrate body.

And that was the end of Mama.

I was flabbergasted. Without lifting a finger I'd managed to kill two birds with one stone—and to recoup my investment as well.

When I finally unwrapped my fortune cookie at home I got an even bigger shock:

Live and let live said the message.

Had I read it in time I would have accepted the situation between Niko, his mother, and myself and—who knows?—perhaps they'd still be alive. I was horrified. How could a fortune cookie give such rotten advice! From now on, I'm switching to tarot cards.

The madness that had led Coleby to kill his wife was now focused on them . . .

THE WITNESSES

By
**STEPHEN
WASYLYK**



The handsome face of the announcer on the small-screen TV faded into a commercial for a magical laundry detergent. As the detergent performed its carefully staged wonders on a magnificently soiled T-shirt, Ashurst deposited the aromatic wrappings of a take-out hamburger and an empty beer bottle into the trash basket, wondering how much longer his wife would visit with her mother in Seattle.

The phone on the kitchen wall rang.

—“You heard the six o’clock news?” asked Manton.

“I heard,” said Ashurst.

“What are we going to do?”

“Nothing.”

Manton’s voice rose. “Nothing? Coleby’s escaped! You know he swore to kill the three of us!”

“He swore many things. He swore he was innocent. He swore we’d made a mistake. And even though we saw him kill his wife, he swore we were lying.”

Manton’s voice was grim. “I’m sorry I was there. The whole thing has caused me nothing but trouble. Suppose he comes after us?”

If there had ever been a person who didn’t want to get involved in anything not directly concerned with his job, it was Manton, which was strange for a salesman so aggressive, but Ashurst supposed it all came down to priorities. Being successful was so important for Manton it left little time or energy for anything else. Ashurst had never met a man so single-minded of purpose, so determined to do what he had to do and to let nothing stand in his way. He had grumbled about every hour in court—time that in his opinion would be better spent in making his sales calls. To Manton, the woman’s death had been an inconvenience.

“I doubt that he will,” said Ashurst. “His big problem is to stay free. Coming back here would be the last thing he’d do.”

“Look at it that way if you want to. I have a wife to consider. I’m calling for police protection.”

“If it will make you feel better.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

Ashurst had no sooner cradled the phone when it rang again. Phillips had been watching the news too, he thought.

He was right.

“You’ve heard that Coleby’s escaped?”

“If I hadn’t, Manton would have told me.”

“Do you think we have anything to worry about?”

“Frankly, no. Threats made in the courtroom are seldom carried out.”

“Maybe, but the man is crazy enough to try anything.”

“I’ll agree that he’s crazy.”

“The prison is only thirty miles away and he escaped this afternoon. If he intends to follow through on that threat he could be here by now.”

“Lock the doors and don’t let anyone in.”

"He won't find *me* at home. I have an important date."

"Going out may be more dangerous than staying in. The man is capable of doing what he said."

"I'm aware of that, but I have no intention of changing my plans. Is your wife still visiting her mother in Seattle?"

"That," said Ashurst, "is where she said she was going. I prefer to believe her."

"So you're alone?"

"Did you think I'd invite a sexy neighbor in for fun and games while she's gone?"

Phillips chuckled. "That's my life-style, not yours. The point I was making is that being alone in that house makes you more vulnerable than either of us. Do you have a gun?"

"Never felt the need for one."

"Maybe we'd all better keep in touch by phone, just in case."

"It might be a good idea."

Ashurst sat for a moment after Phillips hung up, thinking about the touch of coldness he'd felt when he heard Coleby had escaped. They had probably felt the same. There was no question that when Coleby had leaned toward them as he was being led away and said in a low, cutting voice, "I'm going to kill the three of you," he had meant every word. Threats had been made before and never carried out. There was no reason to believe this one would be. Except that it had been made by Coleby, and Coleby was insane, even if the psychiatrists hadn't been able to convince the court of it. Just because he didn't meet the legal definition didn't mean he was sane. There were many degrees of insanity. In our own way we all walk on the edge, thought Ashurst, and you never know what will push us over.

Anyone who had seen Coleby's face when he shot his wife, as they had, would have no doubt that Coleby had gone over that edge. None at all.

They'd been to an early breakfast meeting that morning and afterward, crossing the parking lot of the restaurant; they had seen the small man—a man with a flat face, heavily lidded eyes, and a chin beard—approach a blonde woman and say something and the woman had backed away, her face white. The man pointed a gun at her and she screamed and thrust up a hand to ward him off, but he pulled the trigger and she fell. He had stood there and quickly emptied the gun into her and then calmly stepped into a large car that had the motor running and driven away.

Fifteen seconds, twenty seconds, and it was all over, so fast and so deadly they hadn't had time to react—to do much of anything except try to help the woman, but it was too late even for that.

Their descriptions had led the police to Coleby several hours later. They had picked him out of a police lineup several hours after that. And it had been their testimony that had convicted him because the gun had never been found and no one else had witnessed the killing. From the way the trial developed, Coleby might well have been turned loose if it hadn't been for the three of them, there was so little other evidence. And Coleby had known it and cursed them for it.

There was no way to put into words the hate and vindictiveness that had glittered in those eyes. A man had to be there to see the madness that had led him to kill his wife and that was now focused on them.

Remembering that madness, Ashurst went through the house carefully, making certain all the windows and doors were locked, then he flicked on the outside floodlights. He'd never noticed it before, but because of the heavy shrubbery the lights did little to chase away the heavy early-evening darkness.

The house was silent. Instead of the feeling of warmth and security it had always given him, Ashurst felt a touch of loneliness and apprehension, as though something nameless and threatening lurked in the empty rooms.

He shrugged off the feeling, went to his desk, and pulled his attaché case toward him. It would take several hours to go through all the paperwork he'd brought home. His quarterly report was due the next day.

Close to eight, the phone jangled once, twice, almost casually.

It was Manton.

"I spoke to the police. They said there was little they could do except have a patrol car cruise by occasionally."

"You know they're short of manpower."

"Well, I'm sending my wife to her parents', but I'm staying. I have a right to live in peace and comfort in my own house and I have work to do. I'll be sitting right here with my gun at my side and if anyone who even looks like Coleby sets one foot on my property, that's it."

"Listen," said Ashurst, "why don't you come over here? You'll feel better with someone to talk to."

There was a short silence. "It just occurred to me that Coleby might

go to your house first. It was obvious he hated you most. I really think that if he got to you he wouldn't care too much about me."

Manton sounded as though that was exactly what he was hoping for.

"What about Phillips?"

"Any man who goes out dancing at a time like this instead of protecting himself is responsible for the consequences."

Ashurst dropped the phone into the cradle. Manton had been right about one thing. Coleby's hatred *had* centered on him. Why, he didn't know, except that Coleby might have sensed that the other two looked to him, that he had been the leader, that without him leading the way the other two might not have been so positive in their testimony, particularly Manton.

Ashurst went through the house again, checking. Everything was secure. Through the window the floodlit lawn sloped to the street, more open than the back, so it wasn't likely that Coleby, if he came, would come that way.

He shook off the thought. He was getting to be as bad as Manton. Once loose, Coleby's only thought had probably been to put as much distance between himself and this part of the country as possible.

Damn Manton anyway, he thought. He was making him as paranoid as he was. If Manton wanted to sit in his house with a gun at his side because an obviously insane man had threatened him that was his affair. Ashurst had work to do.

He should have known better.

He was in the middle of tracking down what appeared to be an error in the computer printouts before him when the phone rang. It was Phillips. "How are you making out?" he asked.

Ashurst could hear the measured beat of music in the background. "No problems. Enjoying your date?"

"Very disappointing. I suppose Manton called you."

"A few minutes ago. He's sitting with a gun in his hand waiting for Coleby."

"He'll probably shoot some innocent passerby. You know, I always thought the guy was a little crazy. You should have fired him a long time ago."

"He's an excellent salesman. As long as he delivers on the job I couldn't care less about his personal problems."

"Well, if I were you I wouldn't drink anything he handed me. He wants your job in a bad way."

"So do you."

Phillips chuckled. "You're right, but if I didn't get it I'd simply get drunk for a week. I think Manton would commit suicide. Well, back to the festivities. Keep a sharp lookout."

"I will."

Ashurst returned to his computer printouts.

The stack of paper beside him mounted as the filled-in spaces on the form before him began to settle into a pattern. Manton had done well. So had Phillips. The rest of his sales force trailed them both substantially. Yet the men were entirely different. Manton, thin and intense, was quick, intelligent, and knew the line better than anyone—a classic example of how study and hard work could overcome a lack of native ability. But above all he was an opportunist, chameleonlike in his ability to fit into any situation as long as it was to his benefit. Phillips was the opposite. Easygoing, friendly, likeable, seemingly without Manton's drive, writing orders on the force of his personality more than anything else. And yet there was something fiercely determined about Phillips that would never allow him to be second-best at anything.

Both were in line for Ashurst's job, the younger Manton pushing Phillips hard, which was one reason Phillips had no affection for him. Phillips had been bypassed once—when they had brought Ashurst in—but he had learned to live with that. If he didn't make it this time, there would be no further opportunity, especially under Manton, and Phillips would have to close out his career somewhere else. He could joke about getting drunk for a week but Ashurst knew he would do exactly that and more, because the sales manager's position was the one door to a vice president's office and that was something he wanted as much as Manton.

Ashurst rose, stretched, and went into the kitchen, where he twisted the cap off a bottle of cold beer. The house was silent, the only sound the ticking of the clock in the next room.

Ashurst flicked the switch of the small kitchen radio, half listening to the midnight news as he drank his beer. Coleby's escape rated four sentences, two of which gave him information he hadn't known before. The first told him Coleby had escaped with the revolver his guard had been carrying. The second told him the car he'd commandeered had been found abandoned about a mile away.

So Coleby *had* headed into the city.

The neighbor's dog, a big deep-chested Labrador, barked hoarsely.

Ashurst jerked erect. Why? The dog barked only at strangers. At night? At the rear of the house?

He studied the floodlit yard.

The dog barked again.

Damn, he thought, what the hell is out there?

The floodlights bathed only the area immediately behind the house. The driveway and the detached garage to the side were in the penumbra. Further back, several huge elms broke the light off completely.

Beyond the hedge, the dog barked again.

There was someone in either Ashurst's yard or one of the others.

His stomach suddenly tight, Ashurst set the bottle down and reached for the wall phone. There were three calls he had to make—the first to the police, the others to warn Manton and Phillips.

The phone he held to his ear was lifeless, the dial tone gone.

He replaced it slowly, the iciness in the pit of his stomach spreading upward into his chest and squeezing his heart.

He pictured the entrances to the house in his mind, trying to remember if he had secured them all, realizing suddenly that even if he had he hadn't drawn the blinds and anyone outside could easily see him.

He snapped off the light.

The darkness closed in. Slowly his eyes became adjusted to the soft glow reflected through the windows from the floodlamps outside.

Again he reviewed the possible entrances. As long as they were secure, so was he. Even Coleby wouldn't take a chance on breaking in. While Ashurst had no gun, Coleby couldn't know that, couldn't know he wouldn't be greeted by a shotgun blast. To get at Ashurst he'd have to get into the house by stealth, take him by surprise.

Ashurst felt his tension ease. Coleby's big advantage, taking him unawares, was gone. The man could skulk around the outside of the house all night, but if he couldn't get in Ashurst was safe.

And he couldn't get in.

Or could he?

Ashurst stiffened.

All the windows and doors on the first floor were secure, he was certain of that, but he'd neglected to check one door—the door he should have

checked first—the outside entrance to the basement. The door his wife had a habit of leaving unlocked.

He seemed to remember securing it last night and she hadn't been home to use it. It should be locked.

But was it?

The uncertainty, once loosed, grew so fast it consumed him so that he could remember nothing. A film of perspiration bathed his face and palms. Go down now and check it, he told himself. There may still be time.

He walked softly to the door at the head of the basement stairs and stood looking down into the black well of the basement, his ears straining.

He cautiously reached out and flicked the switch, recoiling at the burst of light because he had convinced himself he'd see Coleby at the foot of the steps looking up at him.

But there was nothing—only the whitewashed walls and the worn steps and no sound at all.

And yet he couldn't dredge up enough nerve to descend.

His mouth dry, he stared down into the bright pool of light until he finally slammed the door closed, slid a chair before it, and leaned against the wall weakly, cursing his stupidity. The thought came that if anything would get him killed it was the fear that was freezing his limbs and shattering his thinking processes. If he sat and waited for Coleby to make the first move, the advantage would be Coleby's. It would be like the day Coleby had killed his wife, when the woman had been frozen into inaction by the gun in Coleby's hand.

No matter what they thought of him, Manton had been right from the beginning. He and Phillips had taken the matter too lightly. But Ashurst now knew there was a man out there stalking him. He had no gun like Manton, but he had his intelligence and mobility.

He moved through the darkened house quickly, flicking off the switches for the outside floodlights as he went. Making his way upstairs, he flipped on the bathroom light, waited for a few minutes, then switched it off. Anyone watching the sequence would assume he was going to bed.

The back bedroom opened onto a small balcony. Ashurst leaned over the railing in the darkness, listening.

The dog was silent now. An occasional car whispered by. Somewhere a cricket chirped, leading a chorus of night sounds.

Ashurst dried his wet palms on his slacks and swung over the railing. He hung suspended by his hands for a long moment, then kicked himself

away from the house and let go, dropping to the lawn and feeling a sharp crack in his ankle as pain darted up his leg and forced a groan. On hands and knees, he scrambled close to the shrubbery and crouched. It occurred to him that the phone line entered the house at this corner. He extended a cautious hand and found the wire, tracing it down to where it entered through a basement window, but before he reached it the wire came loose in his hand.

The nightmare was real. Somewhere in the darkness surrounding the house was a man who intended to kill him and there was only one thing to do—get away as quickly and quietly as possible.

On his hands and one leg, his throbbing ankle held away from the ground, he scuttled toward the distant light in his neighbor's window like an injured crab, expecting to feel the numbing shock of a bullet at any moment.

The police were there in minutes, cars sliding to the curb, powerful spotlights trained on the stone façade of Ashurst's house, uniformed men fanning out across the lawn, moving cautiously until they ringed the place, their guns unholstered.

One reported back to where Ashurst painfully stood beside the sergeant holding the bullhorn.

"The basement door has been forced. It's standing wide open," he said. "He's in there all right."

The sergeant glanced at Ashurst. "Damned good thing you got out. Nobody forces his way into a house just to say hello." He lifted the bullhorn.

Time seemed to stand still after his shouted demand had echoed throughout the neighborhood, until the front door opened and a revolver came spinning out. A man stepped through the opening and stood in the glare of the spotlights, one hand held high, the other before his face to shield his eyes.

Ashurst forgot his throbbing ankle and the fear that still lingered deep inside. He forgot the knot in his stomach and the way his soaked shirt clung, because, instead of easing, the nightmare had grown worse and he felt like howling, "It can't be!" But it was, and it all made sense in a weird way.

If he had been killed, the police would have looked for Coleby, the man known to have a motive for killing him. They wouldn't have known

of how the pressures of another man's ambitions could so distort his perspective he could see Coleby's threat as an opportunity to advance his career by killing Ashurst. Acting on the opportunity must have seemed logical and entirely right, even justified, just as it had for Coleby when he killed his wife.

Which was why, as the man's hands were cuffed behind him and his shifting glances probed the glare of the lights until he found Ashurst, the glitter that had chilled Ashurst's blood that day in the courtroom was there again, this time in the eyes of Phillips.



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And the condemned man ate . . .

LUNCHEON AT QUILLS by JEFFERY SCOTT



If you see nothing odd in paying fifty-two pounds yearly for the privilege of meals costing about fifteen percent more than the same in better restaurants, then Quills is a splendid luncheon club.

Quills is a Victorian cellar with ideas above its previous station. Being only four doors from the concrete box where Toppermost Holdings' staff is stored during the day, the place is a sort of unofficial executives' canteen for that firm. The British love rituals and tradition, so after less than a

decade Quills has the aura of an institution. Clear-minded folk find it a pain, but it can pay to be seen there.

It could also, in one instance, be fatal.

Adrian Borlock ate there every Wednesday. A man with no nickname, no sense of humor, no evident life away from the office, he saw food as fuel and alcohol as a costly indulgence, so the occasion was something of an ordeal, not least for his guests. Borlock was a large fellow with the air of having been assembled out of the human equivalents to cast iron, plastic, and patent leather. The parting in his dark hair was straight and white as a cut to the bone in the instant before blood comes.

He'd been made a director at 29, which wasn't bad. He remained a junior director at 43, which was. Mr. Borlock, Toppermost's marketing-strategy man, didn't realize that he was insane. But then neither did his colleagues, so the oversight was understandable.

"I suppose you'll want wine," he said, as he did every Wednesday, and Fred Plant, already buttering a roll and calling for more, nodded cheerfully. They weren't friends, because Borlock didn't go in for that sort of thing. Fred Plant was a freeloader, gossip, and tease who played office politics—or rather, coached from the touchline—with zest and the eye of a connoisseur.

"A carafe will do," Plant confirmed, mouth full. "The big 'un, mind. House red, Adrian—they can't water it as hard as the white. When they do, that's the rosé."

"Ah," said Borlock, taking the claim at face value. His face darkened. "By God, the old man is here. With Tracy, if you please, bloody Tracy!"

"Told you so. Tony Tracy's secretary has been all around the building, telling everyone Sir Peter was coming up from Hampshire just to take The Young Master to lunch." Plant's tone was chirpy, but he didn't like the way Borlock's head turned, nor the quality of Borlock's stare, putting him in mind of a battleship's gun turret traversing.

Borlock said: "It's not right. He's a—a wicked old man."

Sir Peter Seymore didn't look wicked, just past his best, as indeed he was. Handsome long ago, he smiled a lot. Dieting gave him an emaciated look and his blue eyes were milky somehow. A year before, he'd been chairman of Toppermost. The story went that he remained a power, that his retirement was more apparent than actual. Certainly he came to

London several days a week, and his office in the TH building had changed floors but not size nor opulence.

"They say he's got Italian blood," Adrian Borlock muttered. "He looks a treacherous old Borgia, right enough."

"The Borgias were Spanish, actually. B-o-r-j-a, you know." Fred Plant, having finished his own avocado, quietly snaffled Borlock's as well. Just as casually, he added, "So old Seymore made you promises, eh? Careerwise."

"Yes—no. None of your damned business." Borlock waited for the waiter to stop waiting. He ate steak without tasting it. "We had an understanding."

"Not worth the paper it wasn't written on. Forget the rumors, Adrian. Peter Seymore's out and finished. They let him haunt the place to avoid the scandal of actually throwing him out. Jenny Dainton looks after him, and she tells me he spends all his time dozing under the *Financial Times*. That and looking for people to take to lunch. He must be hard up, descending to Tony Tracy."

Tracy, chinless and deferential, was tucking into scampi while Sir Peter chased salad around a plate, contriving to catch very little. Curly ginger head and silver-gilt head kept bobbing forward in conversation.

Borlock blurted out, "The old swine's giving him my job!"

"Steady on, old lad. The chap at the front door didn't quite catch your last remark." Plant caught a waiter's eye and signaled for another carafe. He loved Borlock's expression, on seeing the bill inflated covertly by such means.

But Borlock was growling on. "The new branch in Brussels, that's *mine*."

"It could happen. Good Lord, Tracy won't get it. He's somebody's idiot nephew, Adrian—in charge of postage stamps, or whatever. Come back to reality."

"I never left." Borlock's rage inspired him to a near facsimile of wit. "Listen, Fred, where does—where did Seymore always lunch *you*?"

"He didn't do that often," Plant admitted, meaning never. "Oh, Quinetti's, I suppose, or that dreadful chophouse place where's there's almost as much sawdust on the floor as they put in the steak-and-kidney pies."

"Exactly. Or the Silver Grill at the Savoy, that's where he took me. When he's good as promised me Brussels just before he retired. The swine's avoided me ever since."

Plant sighed and shook his head. "Because he can't deliver. Get it through your brainbox—Sir Peter's through."

"Rubbish. He's still pulling the strings. Tony Tracy has social position and Lady Seymore's a social climber. It all hangs together."

"Does it?"

"Don't try my patience. Peter Seymore never eats here. That he's doing so now is his way of announcing that Tracy is his protégé. Why else would he come here, stroking Tracy in public?"

"Well, it couldn't be for the cuisine," Plant conceded. Adrian Borlock ordered black coffee, Plant whispered for a large cognac as the waiter brushed by.

"Announcement, and calculated snub," said Borlock. "I hate that old man."

Fred Plant cogitated for a moment. "Don't think I hate anyone—too much effort. Neither do you, Adrian." He wished he could be more certain. "Look, Max Pedlar's the chairman now. If you have a grudge, it ought to be against him."

"No, it's Seymore. I could have changed firms time and again since '74, but he always hinted it was worth my while to stay. Now it's too late, I'm the wrong age."

Plant was cautious. "I never realized you were, um, on close terms with Sir Peter. *That* close—one-day-at-least-some-of-this-will-be-yours stuff." He was deliberately jokey.

"Nothing was put into words. It was simply understood."

"By both of you at once?" asked Plant innocently. Borlock's features writhed and the little man hitched back. "Only kidding, Adrian."

"It's not funny." Borlock clasped his hands. "It's tragic what that man's done to me."

"Quite." Plant thought it best to show sympathy. "Wheeling his new golden boy in here to gloat—bad taste. I bet Sir Peter's not even a member. I know Tracy isn't. He says he can't afford the dues, mean little blighter."

"All the TH board are founder members—they got honorary membership for life when the place opened. It was a dodge to get the rest of us in," Borlock explained. "Wasted—it's the first time Seymore's set foot in here." They rose from the tables.

"I'm a patient man, Fred, a reasonable man. But there's a limit. I'm

going to do something about this." Borlock paid the bill without comment, left Fred Plant at the door, and went away to collect his car.

At 5:05 P.M. Tony Tracy hurried out of the TH building, crossing Posset Street to catch an Underground train. At 5:06 Adrian Borlock ran him down, deliberately causing his death from multiple injuries and massive shock to the central nervous system.

At 5:06 plus 20 seconds, Borlock lost control of his car and rammed a concrete post, tall and slender with a street lamp at the top. The post snapped, crushed the car's roof, and broke his neck efficiently as any hangman.

Stella Seymore watched her husband walking up the garden path. He looked hot and weary. He'd walked a mile from the station.

"Why on earth didn't you take the taxi?" she snapped, knowing why, thinking Sir Peter, shifty, was harder to bear than Sir Peter pompous.

"Oh, the exercise—" he said vaguely. "Pour me a drink, darling, I'm exhausted."

She folded her arms. "You didn't take the taxi because you went off to Town this morning with just enough in your pocket for the return ticket on the train. Your wallet's on the hallstand, along with your checkbook and credit cards. Honestly, Peter, they shoved you out of TH just in time. Talk about senile."

"I'd rather not talk about it, thanks." He made his own drink. "I've a lot on my mind."

"You've nothing on your mind except wounded vanity. Why can't you get under my feet at home, like normal retired men? It's undignified, this skulking around TH, trying to pass yourself off as a power behind the scenes. Nobody's taken in."

Sir Peter finished his drink and started another. "Have a care, dearest. You're sounding a wee bit like a nag and a scold."

"Tough! Alisdair Ryan called just after you left, crying off your lunch date with some transparent excuse. Who did you waylay when you found Alisdair wouldn't come out to play?"

"Hmm? Oh, Tucker—nice young fellow. In charge of communications, a rising man."

"I suppose that means he's in charge of the postage stamps." Lady

Seymore put the decanter onto a tarnished silver tray and the tray into the sideboard, which she closed, rather pointedly.

Scowling, she demanded, "How could you take anyone to lunch, even the office boy? Peter, if you've started cadging meals of your poor long-suffering ex-minions we'll really have a row."

Sir Peter smirked. "Not a bit of it. Embarrassing to find myself broke. I could have drawn a loan from Accounts, or touched Max for a tenner, but—"

Stella Seymore shuddered.

"I didn't," he hurried on. "Remembered about being a member of that dreadful phoney club affair next to the office. Ghastly dump, but I have an account there. Never went while I was in harness. Young Tucker—Tinker?—whatever his name is, he was no end pleased, smack in the center of the TH eye, being entertained by one of the mighty."

Sir Peter Seymore spoke what he believed to be the truth. "I like to keep in touch, Stella. And where's the harm? It didn't cost young Tanner a thing."

How to Order

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There are worse things, Dulcey explained, than being alone . . .

I NEVER SEEN NO BUILDING TWENTY STORIES TALL

by
PATRICIA
L. SCHULZE



“Dulcey!” Sheriff Jim’s harsh voice stopped her halfway across the office. She lowered the steaming bucket to the floor and clattered the miscellany of mops, brooms, and rags beside it.

“You can clean up, but don’t go near that back cell. I got a killer locked up back there.”

Dulcey’s bony hand picked at the stretched neck of her faded sweat-shirt. “The one that got the Webers?”

Sheriff Jim grunted in affirmation. "Caught him out by that old abandoned shack on 81. Don Blumer's dogs woke him up about midnight, carryin' on like crazy. He thought at first it was that old coon's been bothering his chickens but, spooked as everyone's been since the Weber thing, he called me before he went out to look. Good thing too."

Dulcey clasped her thin arms across her chest to hide their trembling. "What's he look like?"

"Ordinary. But just you stay away from him. You saw Carl and Lucy Weber when we brought them in?"

Dulcey nodded as a shudder rippled through her slim body.

"Just you remember what they looked like. That ought to be enough to keep your curiosity under control. Now get along and do your work, only when you bring his breakfast down give it to me. I don't want you anywhere near him."

Dulcey gathered up her mops and bucket and finished the office and front of the jail. Then she went up to the small apartment above the jail and fixed breakfast for herself and the prisoner. Usually she put the breakfast out on the table in the small day room and unlocked any cells that held prisoners so they could eat, locking the barred day-room door behind her as she left. The jail's usual occupants were serving out a few days' sentence for bad checks or petty theft and it had never crossed her mind that there was any danger. But this morning she followed Sheriff Jim's orders and left the breakfast tray on his desk.

She waited in the office until he returned.

"That's the new routine until after this guy's trial," the sheriff said. "Anybody who could do what he did, I don't want you taking any chances."

Dulcey silently agreed with him and for the next week kept his rules about the meals. But her curiosity grew stronger and each day as she mopped out the office and jail she found herself drawn farther along the line of cells until her mop reached the door of the last cell, where she stopped and listened but heard no sound through the solid steel door.

One day as she was mopping there she had a feeling of eyes watching her and she glanced up. There was a face looking at her through the small glass panel set in the steel door—a glimpse of an eye, a brief view of sandy hair. Ordinary, like Sheriff Jim had said.

She picked up her bucket and backed down the corridor to the day room. The eye followed her all the way.

That glimpse aroused her curiosity. She began to look for ways to get a closer look at the killer.

One day she lingered outside the office after Sheriff Jim let the prisoner into the day room for his breakfast. When the sheriff went across the street for his own breakfast she moved closer to the barred door to watch the killer eat, facing away from her. She observed him lift the plastic fork carefully to his mouth, chew neatly and thoroughly, and dab at his lips with his napkin between each bite. She frowned at this fastidiousness in a man, so like her brother. She started to move away.

"Don't go, please," he said, his back still to her. "The sheriff won't be back for a while.

"Please," he said again, turning toward her, "I'll go crazy if I don't talk to someone."

Dulcey glanced at the office clock. It would be some time before the sheriff came back. She inched closer to the barred door.

They measured each other with their eyes.

"My name's Frank," he said. "Did they tell you?"

Dulcey shook her head. "Everybody just calls you the killer. First time I known you had a name."

Frank winced at the bluntness of her statement. "I'm not a killer," he said.

Dulcey gave a harsh laugh. "I seen the Webers when they brought them in."

"I didn't do that," Frank insisted, "But why should I expect you to believe that, you're probably just like all the rest of them around here."

He waited but she did not respond to his baiting.

"I told you my name. What's yours?"

"Dulcey."

"How old are you, Dulcey?"

"Seventeen."

"Seventeen? Why aren't you in school?"

Dulcey shrugged without interest. "Don't go to school no more."

Frank shook his head. "A young girl like you ought to be in school."

"Can't see how going to school did you any use." Dulcey glanced at the clock, no longer interested in the conversation. "Got to go now. Sheriff Jim'll be back any minute."

"Wait. Will you come again tomorrow? Just to talk. I've really got to have someone to talk to."

Dulcey looked at him for a moment, his young sad face, his innocent brown eyes, so much like Jamie's. "Maybe." She shrugged her indifference and ambled out of the office.

In the weeks that followed, their brief morning talks became a fixed habit. As soon as Sheriff Jim was safely across the street Dulcey would hitch a chair up to the barred door. At first Frank did most of the talking. As he told her about his early life, Dulcey was able to see him, alone, drifting from place to place, always on the move, always lonely. Then he talked about the Webers, Lucy and Carl, how they had taken him in, given him a job. And then how Carl's attitude had changed suddenly.

"I left that night, the night they were killed, but I didn't kill them. I couldn't have hurt Lucy."

At times Frank became confused in her mind with her brother, Jamie, and she felt a growing sympathy for him. But on the surface she only responded with grunts and indifferent shrugs. Then one day he talked about San Francisco and Dulcey couldn't hide her interest.

"You been there? With all them buildings that climb up the hills like ants in a row?"

"I lived there before I came out here," Frank said. "How do you know about San Francisco?"

"I got a postcard once, from my brother. He was living in this big hotel, twenty stories he said. I ain't never seen no building twenty stories tall."

"Oh, I've seen buildings taller than that," Frank said, watching her sudden interest. "When I get out of here I'm going to head for someplace where the buildings reach to the sky. I'm going to hide in their shadows until all this just seems like a bad dream."

Dulcey gave a snort and moved her chair back to the desk. "When you leave here they're gonna take you in chains to the state pen and strap you into that old chair they got. You ain't never gonna see no tall buildings again."

The next day Frank tried to make Dulcey talk about herself. "How come you never tell me anything about yourself? Yesterday you mentioned a brother. Do you have any other brothers or sisters?"

"No, just Jamie."

"What about your parents?"

Dulcey's mouth drew into a thin line. "My ma died when I was five. That's when Pa started drinkin'. Then when I was fourteen Pa got hisself

all liquored up one night and walked in front of a train." She gave a dry laugh. "Damn fool. Only one train through here a week and he gets hi by it. After that Jamie took off and I been on my own since."

"On your own since you were fourteen? Didn't anyone take care o you?"

"Oh, there was them social workers. They tried a couple of foster homes, but I just kept running away. After a time they give up on me. Sheriff Jim, he's some sort of cousin of my ma's, he let me have a room upstairs. That got the social workers off my back. By and by, Jim seen how school wasn't no good for me and he let me quit and give me this job."

Frank shook his head. "You should be in school."

"Wasn't no use. That teacher, she'd be up in front of the room talking about something and my eyes they'd sort of wander to the window and fix on somethin' out there, and next thing I'd know I'd sort of drift out that window. Got so nothin' in the room was real, only whatever was outside that window. Jim, he understood and tried to explain to the teacher, but she got mad, took it real personal-like. Finally Jim seen it wasn't no use."

"So now you're all alone except for the sheriff?"

Dulcey was unmoved by his sympathy. "They's worst things than bein' alone. I tried to tell Jamie that but he wouldn't listen."

"Where's Jamie now?"

"Somewhere out in Nevada, never heard for sure."

"Does he still write to you? Will he be coming back for you?"

Dulcey moved to the door without answering him.

She stayed away for two days, not liking it when the talk touched on her private affairs. When she did come back on the third day she found Frank looking pale and panicky. She didn't ask him what was wrong but he launched into the subject immediately.

"That lawyer of mine was here yesterday. Did you know my trial was going to start in a week?"

"I heard."

"You heard." He paced the day room like the caged animal he was. "What else did you hear, Dulcey? Do you ever come out of that dream world of yours long enough to listen to the talk around town?"

His words stung her and she flared back before she could control herself.

I hear the talk. Folks figure it won't take the jury more'n five minutes to convict you. They say the warden's gettin' all ready for you up to the state pen. That old chair ain't been used for over thirty years but they're fixin it up special just for you."

Frank groaned. "But I'm innocent!"

"So you always say."

"What do you say, Dulcey? Do you think I'm guilty?"

"What you care what I think?"

"It's important to me what you think."

Dulcey studied the earnest pleading on his face, then turned away. "I guess you're innocent if you say so."

Frank came and entreated her through the bars. "I'm innocent, but they're going to convict me. Isn't that right?"

"I guess so."

"I can't let them do that. I've got to get out of here." He went and sat back down in his chair and shoved his unfinished breakfast around on the plate. "There's no way to break out of here. They built this place too well."

Dulcey listened to him talking as if to himself.

"If only I could get hold of the keys some way, but no chance of that." He looked at Dulcey but the expression on her face didn't change.

"Do you know where the sheriff keeps his keys at night?" he asked.

"Sure, in the desk here."

Dulcey watched him work it out.

"Could you get hold of them some night after he's asleep?"

"Why should I?"

"You don't want me to die, do you?"

She shrugged and turned away again. Frank watched her, then said in a different tone, "I'd take you with me, to somewhere where the buildings are twenty, thirty stories tall, to a place where you can't even see the top of them when you're standing in the street. I could show you some real sights, Dulcey."

When she turned back and he saw the calculating light in her eyes he continued, "Course we'd need some wheels, some way to get away quick."

"I've got a car," she said. "It's Jamie's but he won't be back for it now."

"Will you do it, Dulcey? Will you go away with me tonight?"

"Why not?" She shrugged . . .

It was a dark night—what little light there was came from the stars, the moon having long ago set beneath the horizon. They had traveled about a hundred miles, Dulcey driving swiftly and, to Frank's surprise, competently. He peered into the darkness ahead. Spotting a rest stop, he asked her to pull over.

She put the car in park and switched off the ignition, then sat in resigned patience, her hands resting lightly on the wheel, her eyes gazing ahead into the blankness of the night.

"I'm sorry, Dulcey, but this is as far as we go," Frank said softly.

She glanced sideways and her eyes picked out the soft gleam of a knife blade.

"I figured," she said. Her hands dropped to her lap, clutching at her handbag.

"I'd like to take you with me but you know how it is. When they find us gone they're going to go all out to find me. I figure one can hide better than two."

Dulcey shifted sideways on the seat until she was facing him, the bag gripped tightly on her lap.

"I'm really sorry," he continued earnestly, "but at first I thought it would be better for you to come along. You were so alone."

"There's worst things than being alone," Dulcey said, her voice hypnotic and dreamlike. "Jamie never believed that, but I guess he knows now."

"What could be worse?" Frank was puzzled by the lack of fear in her voice and on what he could see of her face in the dim starlight.

"Bein' dead," she said flatly as she slipped a gun from her purse. "Jamie never believed me though. He was so lonely after Pa died and I was too young to help him. He took off for California, just lookin' for someone so he wouldn't have to be alone." She moved her left hand under her right wrist to steady the heavy gun. "He found someone too, a pretty woman, just like Lucy Weber. They went to Nevada to get away from her husband. Only then I guess she got tired of him—you always get tired of people who hang onto you too much, who need you too much. But Jamie couldn't let her leave, he was so afraid of being alone. He killed her, just like you done the Webers. He got caught too."

Frank stared at the dark deadly thing in Dulcey's hand. The knife slid from his trembling fingers. "You said Jamie was in Nevada."

"He is. Buried somewhere. They shot him. Out here we got the chair,

but they shoot people in Nevada." A puzzled frown crossed her face. "But I guess it'll be the same for you, won't it? You'll be shot too, just like Jamie."

"Dulcey, wait!" Frank pressed frantically against the door. "You don't want to do this. Let's go on together, after all. All those things I said to you back at the jail, I meant them. I didn't kill the Webers. I wouldn't have hurt you either, I just wanted to scare you so you'd get out of the car. I was wrong. Let's go on just like we planned."

"The first time I saw you I thought how much you looked like Jamie. Even acted like him when you was scared and wanted somethin'. I guess that's why I picked up Sheriff Jim's revolver when I got the keys out of his desk." A soft regret crept into her voice. "Jamie always looked so innocent, but I never could believe him."

Calmly and deliberately she pulled the trigger. Then again and again. Then she reached over him, released the door, and pushed him out. She looked down at the huddled shape on the ground.

"I never believed you either. I knew you killed them Webers. But you might have meant it, about taking me with you. If you was afraid of being alone."

Dropping the revolver into her purse, she rested her hands lightly on the steering wheel and gazed dreamily into the dark night. After a few minutes she started the engine, put the car in gear, and eased it onto the highway. Without so much as a glance in the rearview mirror she drove steadily east, toward the sun and buildings twenty stories tall.

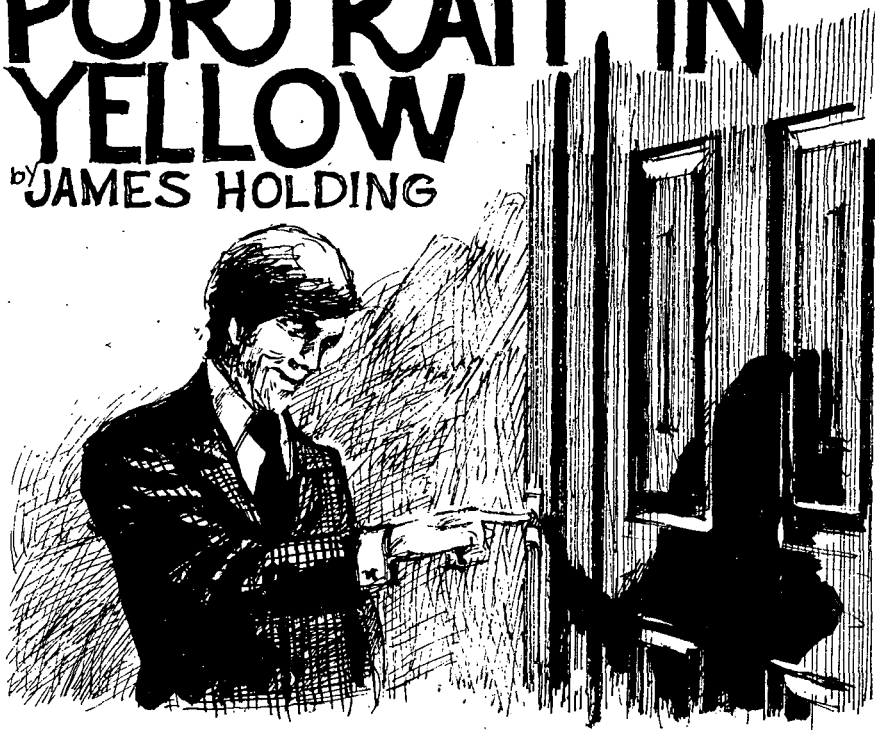


Borelli had a regular arsenal of weapons available to him . . .



PORTRAIT IN YELLOW

by JAMES HOLDING



Even Borelli, who had seen some strange things in his time, thought Conover's note very odd indeed. The note read:

"Provide yourself with an alibi between four and eight P.M. Tuesday. Come to my house secretly at six. I have a proposition for you. It concerns my Van Gogh."

The note was signed "Conover" in the bold hand Borelli remembered.

Below the signature was a hastily scrawled postscript. "Come armed. And burn this note."

Not for a moment did Borelli consider declining the invitation. Borelli's late daughter-in-law, Jessie, had once confided to him that her father's Van Gogh would bring at least a million at auction. Borelli remembered the painting. It hung over Conover's fireplace, the portrait of a bearded man holding a small purple flower, the whole canvas so bathed in violent yellow light that it almost hurt your eyes. Borelli wouldn't have given ten dollars for the thing until he learned its value.

Yes, the Van Gogh alone was enough. But besides, he was very curious, as to what that rich overeducated bastard Conover had up his sleeve now, after utterly ignoring Borelli since Jessie's death.

The alibi would be no problem. Trixie Johanna would willingly provide it, as she had on other occasions. No problem about a weapon either. Borelli grinned. He had a regular arsenal of them available to him.

Thus, on Tuesday, Borelli jumped into a '79 Olds Cutlass he'd just taken in trade at his used car lot, drove across the Highland Park Bridge, and presented himself at Conover's sculptured front door in the exclusive Fox Chapel section of the city just as the November sun was going down. Glancing about him to be sure his arrival was indeed secret, he rang the doorbell.

Conover himself answered the door. An older Conover than Borelli remembered—thinner, almost shriveled, but still with the dynamic manner that had marked (and immeasurably aided) his climb to the chairmanship of his huge conglomerate.

"Come in, Pete," said Conover hospitably. "You're exactly on time."

Pete? thought Borelli wryly. A new intimacy. It used to be simply and contemptuously Borelli when Jessie was alive.

"Helen and Albert are off to Heinz Hall to hear Oscar Peterson," Conover said expansively. "We're quite alone." Helen and Albert were his servants.

He led Borelli into the living room, touching a light switch to banish the evening shadows. The living room was done in beige and soft browns to provide a fitting setting for the blazing Van Gogh above the fireplace. "Mix yourself a drink," Conover said, waving toward a wet bar in an alcove. "What would you like?"

"Scotch on the rocks will do," said Borelli, moving toward the bar. "How about you?"

"The same, if you don't mind fixing me one." Conover sank into a chair beside a gleaming hardwood table with a mother-of-pearl chessboard inlaid in its top. "I'm not feeling too chipper tonight." He seemed to breathe with difficulty.

"Coming up," said Borelli. He filled two crystal glasses with ice, poured Chivas Regal over it.

"Bring a couple of cocktail napkins too, if you will," suggested Conover. "Saves hunting for coasters."

"Right." Borelli carried the drinks to the table, placed a cocktail napkin under each, and sat down across from Conover. "I got your note," he prompted.

"Yes. Thanks for coming." Conover took a sip of his scotch. "Drink up and we'll talk."

Borelli tasted his drink. It was better whisky than he was used to. He took a larger sip and said, "You mentioned that." He motioned with his left glass toward the Van Gogh, now half in shadow.

"My Van Gogh." Conover savored his whisky.

"You said you had a proposition."

"That's right. Isn't it beautiful, Pete?" He looked at the Van Gogh with glowing eyes.

Borelli contented himself with a noncommittal sniff by way of reply.

Conover laughed. "I don't blame you for refusing to answer," he said, "You can scarcely see the painting in this light. Push the switch beside the fireplace there, will you?"

Borelli left his chair and stepped over to the fireplace. He found the switch and snapped it impatiently. A long tubular light came on above the Van Gogh.

"Thanks. That's much better. Now we can see what we're talking about. Don't you like it, Pete, honestly?"

Borelli returned to his chair and sat down. He took a swallow of whisky. "I suppose so," he conceded. He studied the painting. It *was* beautiful if you thought of it in terms of a million dollars. "But why did he make it so damned yellow?"

Conover said, "Nobody knows for sure. The most likely explanation is that he was experiencing the effects of digitalis intoxication when he painted it. In his day, people took digitalis for everything from consti-

pation to epilepsy. And Van Gogh was an epileptic. The drug was made from foxglove. That's a foxglove flower the man is holding in the painting."

"Yeah?" said Borelli, bored.

"Yes. And one of the toxic symptoms of digitalis intoxication, it seems, is a heavy predominance of yellow in the victim's field of vision." Conover slanted an amused glance at Borelli. "Does that answer your question?"

"Yeah," said Borelli, "but it doesn't answer what the painting's got to do with me."

"I'm sorry, Pete." Conover sobered at once. "Actually, I couldn't resist the urge to lecture a bit. Forgive me. Whether you like the picture or not, Pete, you *do* know it's an authentic masterpiece, don't you? Unique? And worth a lot of money?"

"Sure. I know that. Jessie once told me it would bring a million bucks."

Conover stiffened. "Jessie has nothing to do with this, Borelli—nor has your son, Tim! I'm trying my best to forget all that. Do you mind?"

"O.K., O.K. Fine with me. But is a million about right?"

"On today's market, perhaps more. Does that interest you?"

"Who wouldn't be interested in a million bucks?"

"Good. Then you'll be interested in my proposition."

"So lay it on me."

"It's simply this: I'll *give* you the Van Gogh as a gift, free and without strings, if you agree to perform a small service for me."

"Give it to me? Just like that? A million bucks?"

"Yes. But in return, you must do something for me."

"What can I do for you that's worth a million bucks?"

"You can kill me," said Conover quietly.

Borelli had suspected it since the moment Conover had opened the door to him. "Kill you? You're out of your skull, Conover."

"No," said Conover. "I'm sick. I'm dying. And I don't want to drag it out. Can you understand that? You *have* heard of euthanasia, haven't you?"

"Sure, sure." Borelli touched his left lapel. "That's why you told me to bring a weapon?"

"Of course. Did you?"

Borelli nodded. "But this is screwy. You're asking me to pull a gun and let you have it now? Right here?" Borelli's voice was steady. He sounded

thoughtful, rather than horrified, Conover noted. But then he wasn't a novice at contemplating murder.

"Why not?" asked Conover. "A million is considerably in excess of your usual fee, isn't it?" The old contempt was back in his voice and manner.

"Nothing's ever been proved against me," Borelli said with dignity.

"Nor will it be this time," Conover said quickly. "There's no way you can ever be connected to my—ah, departure. Why do you think I told you to arrange an alibi and make this visit a secret? Incidentally, did you burn my note?"

"Yeah," Borelli said.

"So you can oblige me without a breath of suspicion touching you."

"Tell me how. I'm willing to listen. As a matter of fact, I'd like nothing better than putting you down, Conover. I've always thought you were a superior stuck-up jerk, did you know that?"

Conover smiled. "I knew it. And counted on it when I sent you the note. Listen, Borelli, it's simple. I sit here at this table and have a cocktail every night of my life. Tonight my servants have taken the night off to see a show downtown. I'm alone in the house, an easy mark for the thief who's been casing my home."

"Thief?"

"An art thief, don't you see? Art theft's become a major industry. No reason why my Van Gogh should be immune, is there?"

Borelli said, "A thief couldn't fence your picture for any million bucks."

"No ordinary thief, perhaps. But somebody with—" Conover cleared his throat. "—connections could. There are a hundred private art collectors who would give an arm and a leg for that Van Gogh."

Borelli drained his whisky glass. "Run over it one more time. This art thief breaks into your house—"

"No break-in is necessary. The front door isn't locked."

"O.K. So this art thief enters your home, steals the Van Gogh, and finds he has to waste you in the process, is that it?"

"Exactly. I put up a bit of resistance, perhaps, for the sake of verisimilitude—"

"For the sake of what?"

"Appearances. So you shoot me, take the Van Gogh out of its frame—no art thief would take the frame—handling it so you don't leave fingerprints." Conover nodded at Borelli's whisky glass. "Then you wash that glass, replace it on the bar, and wipe everything else you've touched free

of possible prints—the ice tongs, the decanter you poured from, the doorknobs, everything.” Conover paused. “But who am I to be instructing a professional in these matters? What do you say? Is it a deal, Borelli?”

Borelli pushed back his chair and stood up. “Deal,” he said as matter-of-factly as though completing a transaction at his used car lot. “My bullet for your yellow picture, right?”

Conover nodded.

Borelli reached under his coat.

After work the following evening Borelli grabbed a fast burger and shake at McDonald’s and went home to his apartment above the Armenian restaurant half a block from his lot on Baum Boulevard. He was still moving in a semi-daze, trying happily to adjust to the fact he was now a rich man—or would be when he got his cut of what the Van Gogh would fetch on the art black market.

No more peddling beat-up used cars, he told himself; no more hit jobs done for the boys at bargain prices; no more living from hand to mouth on the edge of big-time crime with the cops always lurking in the background waiting to pounce. Borelli could hardly believe his luck.

He was examining the Van Gogh under a reading lamp in his cramped livingroom when the knock came on the door.

“Who is it?” he called.

“Police, Borelli. Open up.”

Borelli was surprised but not alarmed. He was an old hand at this sort of thing. Every time a murder was committed anywhere in Allegheny County the cops came to see him. Just because he was known to be a good friend, as well as an employee, of the local capo, Rocco Cassini, who owned Borelli’s used car lot.

Unhurriedly, Borelli thrust the Van Gogh out of sight beneath his daybed, went to the door, and opened it.

Lieutenant Randall of Homicide grinned at him.

“What do you want?” asked Borelli, irritated. He had been interviewed by Randall before.

“Aren’t you going to ask me in?”

“Be my guest.” Randall came in and Borelli shut the door. “Is this just a quickie or will you have time to sit down?”

Unperturbed by the sarcasm, Randall sat down in a straight chair beside the window. “Thanks,” he said. “It’s been a big day.”

Borelli lounged against the ornate cabinet of his 37-inch color-TV set. "Yeah?"

"Yes. The Conover shooting. Have you heard about it?"

Borelli nodded. "On the eleven o'clock news this morning."

"He was a relative of yours, wasn't he?"

"Conover? Just by marriage. My son Tim married his daughter Jessie. They met in college and eloped."

"Weren't they killed in an automobile accident a few years ago?"

"Yeah."

"Because your son was so high on cocaine he didn't know his accelerator from his brake?"

"Look, Lieutenant," said Borelli. "It was a three-day sensation at the time. You know all about it. So why are you raking it up now?"

Randall waved a negligent hand. "Curiosity. I'm on the Conover murder and I need all the help I can get."

"Well, I can't give you any help. O.K.?"

"You haven't seen Conover lately?"

"Not since our kids got killed."

"You'd think that two fathers, related by marriage, both widowers and both grieving for their only children, would get together once in a while," Randall said reflectively. "Even if only for a drink."

"Not Conover and me," said Borelli. "He hated my guts."

"Really? Why?"

"He blamed me for Jessie's death."

"How come?"

"He thought Tim's supply of cocaine came from somebody I knew."

"One of Cassini's pushers?"

Borelli nodded reluctantly. "He was wrong as hell about that."

"But he still hated your guts?"

"I haven't seen him or heard from him in four years."

Randall yawned and stretched. "O.K. I just wanted your word on that. We're looking under every stone on this one, Borelli—meaning no offense. Conover was one of our most prominent citizens."

"The announcer on the news said the guy who stole his painting probably killed him."

"You ever see it?"

"The painting? Sure. Several times before the kids' accident."

"I've never seen the thing. Nothing but a photo of it. What's it like?"

"It's yellow," said Borelli, "that's all I remember about it. Picture of some guy in a beard." He paused. "You think the guy who lifted the picture outed Conover?"

"That's what it looks like. Except for a couple of kinda funny things."

"How do you mean funny?"

"Phony-funny. Unnatural."

"Like what?" Borelli's body suddenly felt rigid.

"Like Conover's broken finger and his necktie under one ear and a cufflink ripped out of his shirt sleeve. As though he'd tried to put up a struggle to protect his painting."

"Maybe he did."

"He was dying of cancer, did you know that? He was too weak to walk to his mailbox and back, his servants say. A three-year-old kid could have flattened him with a fly-swatter. There was no need to put a slug through his head." Inconsequentially Borelli thought, Randall's eyes are almost as yellow as the Van Gogh. "Doesn't that seem kinda funny to you?" Randall asked.

After a moment, Borelli suggested, "Maybe he didn't want to leave a live witness behind him, this thief."

"You talk like a cop," Randall said. "That wasn't the only funny thing about the murder, though, Borelli. He was having his regular evening drink before dinner, the servants say, sitting at that fancy chess table in his living room. You remember it?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, when the servants came home from their concert and found Conover dead, his half finished drink was still on the chess table."

"What's funny about that?"

"Scotch whisky in his glass. Conover hadn't touched scotch since he was a young man. Allergic to it or something, the servants say. It made him sick to his stomach."

Borelli stared at Randall without expression. "That *does* seem funny," he said.

"Funny enough to make us check his whisky glass for fingerprints," Randall said. "And you know what? We found a set of dandies. But they weren't Conover's."

Borelli fought to keep his expression bland. In his chest, however, he had the sensation of a giant fist squeezing his heart like a sponge. That bastard switched glasses on me, he thought. When? How? Instantly it

was clear to him: when he had turned his back to switch on the picture light, Conover had made the switch, using the cocktail napkins to avoid touching the glasses themselves. He said, "Whose prints were they?"

"Yours," said Randall. The irises of his mustard-colored eyes seemed to elongate vertically, like those of a poisonous snake.

"Mine?" Borelli's vocal control surprised him. "You're joking, of course."

"No joke. The prints are yours. We have them on file here in connection with that old carrying charge against you. But to make sure, we got an ID on them from Washington too. What do you say to that?"

Borelli sat down on the daybed and said nothing.

"You must have an alibi for the time of Conover's killing, haven't you? Between five and eight is when the coroner figures Conover was killed."

Borelli said, "Of course I have an alibi."

"Trixie Johanna?"

"Call her."

"I already did. I think she's getting a little tired of alibiing you, Borelli. I had the feeling I could break her down this time by giving her a friendly smile."

Borelli's shoulders wanted to sag, but he resolutely held them square. "You've got a little circumstantial evidence there, Lieutenant. But a good attorney can blow a hole in it a yard wide."

"Which reminds me," Randall said, "do you want an attorney? Do you want me to read you your rights? Because I'm going to take you in."

"You're damn right I want a lawyer. And I already know my rights, for God's sake. Who doesn't, that watches TV?"

"And meanwhile, as long as I'm here; do you mind if I take a look around your place?"

"You got a warrant?"

"That's from TV too." Randall drew a paper from his pocket and slapped it against his thigh. "I just caught Judge Gray before he left his chambers. Wasn't that lucky?" He handed the paper to Borelli, who took it without a word, not bothering to glance at it. "Let's start with that daybed. Mind standing up, Borelli?"

Borelli stood up. Randall said casually, "Don't try anything drastic, will you? Officer Reilly is waiting downstairs for you." He lifted the skirt of the daybed cover, groped beneath it, and brought out the Van Gogh. He raised his eyebrows as if in vast surprise. "How about that?" he said. "A

painting under your bed. Picture of a man with a beard. And yellow as hell. Borelli, I do believe this is the painting stolen from Conover's home. Wouldn't you say so?"

Borelli said nothing.

Randall chuckled. "The only thing is, this isn't Conover's Van Gogh. According to Conover's attorney, he willed that to the Mellon Gallery and gave them actual custody of it a month ago when he got the news he was dying. This is nothing but a cheap copy, done by a second-year student at the Carnegie Art School." Amused, he gathered the painting under one arm.

"Let's go," he said. He grinned at Borelli. "Conover really *did* hate your guts, didn't he?"

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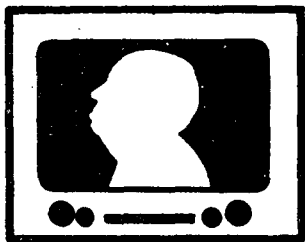
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CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

“Hi, I’m Guy Haines,” responds the tennis-player at the start of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train*, when approached aboard the Washington express by a wild-eyed young traveller. If it had all happened today, Guy might have taken the air shuttle from New York to D. C., inhibiting the leisurely discussion of murder swaps which followed. But if it were filmed today, rather than in 1951, star Farley Granger—who played Guy—would not look very much older.

Now only slightly gray, still with an intense, youthful air, Granger currently has the part of mystery writer Sidney Bruhl, the manipulator of Broadway’s long-running *Deathtrap*. Granger springs the trap well. Recently he reminisced with COS about his crimes on screen.

After his debut in Lillian Hellman’s propagandistic wartime thriller *The North Star* (1943) and service in the Navy, Granger spent some interesting years in Hollywood doing parts that were either boy-next-door or neurotic, but generally leads in far from routine films. His first crime melodrama, coincidentally Nicholas Ray’s first directing chore, was the rarely seen *They Live By Night* (1948), a darkly oppressive tale of a fugitive couple on the run. We know from the opening narrative that the lovers are doomed, even though for the most part Granger—a prison escapee—steals only to survive. The scene in which the hunted Granger and girlfriend Cathy O’Donnell seek out a justice of the peace at night is just one of many memorable moments in a thoughtful and innovative film. (Helicopter photography was used for the first time to intensify their sense of vulnerability.) “But Howard Hughes had just taken over RKO, which

made *They Live By Night*, and he didn't like the film," Granger remembers wryly. "So he held up its release for three years, and in the meantime all Nick Ray's new techniques had already been copied by others." Nevertheless, it brought him to the attention of Alfred Hitchcock and the role of the collegiate thrill killer in *Rope*.

Based on Patrick Hamilton's stage reworking of the Leopold-Loeb case, *Rope* was innovative as well: Hitchcock filmed it all as a one-set theatrical play, the camera fluidly gliding through ten-minute takes with no cutting to individual shots. Hitch did not much care for the result and withdrew it from circulation after its release. For Granger, however, it was a solid acting experience; even though very much Jimmy Stewart's picture—he plays the professor who traps his murderous students in philosophical debate—the younger actor disintegrates nicely on screen. Granger and Hitchcock liked each other from the first, and became lifelong friends. During his Hollywood years Granger dined with the director and his wife regularly. Of his difficult first role for Hitch, Granger recalls admiringly: "He trusted you as an actor."

The trust was merited, and Granger went on to broaden his range in melodramas for other directors. *Side Street* (1950) was the first crime film shot completely in New York City. In it the actor plays a debt-ridden mail carrier (his wife, Cathy O'Donnell again, is pregnant) who on impulse, in despair, steals an envelope containing \$200 from an office desk. But the money was a blackmail payoff, the mob is involved, and several murders later both the underworld and the police are after him. Directed by Anthony Mann, it is first-grade film noir, though the ending is less grim than that in *They Live By Night*. The same year Granger was seen as the confused neurotic in *Edge of Doom*, a young man who attacks his parish priest with a crucifix and kills him. The remainder of this gloomy drama details the police investigation and the exposure of Granger's guilt. Although studio executives, afraid the film would be thought 'irreligious,' brought in Dana Andrews to soften the script, the movie failed and Granger's extremely good acting in it is rarely seen today.

Then friend Hitch called Granger to give him the most memorable screen role of his career: the tennis pro trapped in a ricochet murder scheme in *Strangers on a Train*. Granger recalls that the director told him the plot of the film in his office. Hitchcock was so expansive a storyteller that the session was "better than seeing the movie." Hitch did his preparations well; despite considerable changing of the Patricia Highsmith

novel by, first, Raymond Chandler and then Czenzi Ormonde (neither of whom Granger recalls meeting), there was no deviation from the script once shooting began and every shot was pre-planned, sketched by an artist on pictures which covered all four office walls. By the second day of filming, Granger found the director sitting in a corner looking dejected. "I'm so bored," Hitch explained. He had already quite finished the picture in his mind.

Curiously, Granger afterwards did few mystery films. In the 1955 real-crime enactment, *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing*, he was the eccentric murderer of architect Stanford White (Ray Milland) over the affections of showgirl Evelyn Nesbit (Joan Collins). In Italy he starred as a police detective pursuing a multiple murderer—he doesn't recall the film's title. And just this year he played a police inspector again, in a thriller now called *Graduation Day*, shot in Cape May, New Jersey, in which a psychopath stalks a high school class's twenty-fifth reunion. It is a small role, done as a favor to a friend.

Granger was also active in the Golden Age of live television. One of his favorite roles, or should we say *two*: the double leads in the *Playhouse 90* adaptation of Josephine Tey's *Brat Farrar*, in which he played look-alikes who substitute for one another in a psychological murder puzzle. As film or tape trickery wasn't possible in those days, he literally had to go out one door and come in another as somebody else. "I had 37 changes of costume. There were two people always waiting in the wings to tear off my clothes." The thriller came off well, too.

Now Granger is on Broadway, with a good deal of theatrical experience—including leads in *Dracula* and *The King and I*—behind him. Although he is following several actors of stature in Ira Levin's murderously funny *Deathtrap*, he is, in the opinion of more than one critic, the best Sidney Bruhl so far. It's unfair to discuss the plot of the twisty show in detail, but one can say it concerns a has-been mystery playwright in his Connecticut home, the weapons of his former stage triumphs hanging on the walls around him, who receives through the mail from a former seminar student the script for a superb murder play. Bruhl muses grumpily to his wife: "I'd like to beat the wretch over the head with that mace there, bury him in a four-hundred-pound hole somewhere and send the thing off under my own name. To David Merrick or Hal Prince. Now *there's* the best idea I've had in ages!"

And so a plot is hatched, the young student is invited to his home, and

the second-scene curtain falls on murder.

The reason Granger is so good as Bruhl is the sense of fun he brings to the part. He has great rapport with the audience: "I'm really mean and conniving, and audiences love it." *Deathtrap*, the American *Mousetrap*, is already the longest-running mystery drama *ever* on Broadway, a landmark. With Granger it should continue to shock, surprise, and enchant theater-goers for some time to come.

But any conversation with Granger about his career returns to his respect and affection for Alfred Hitchcock. "He was unique and original," says the actor. "These days there are many attempts to copy him, but they can't, because the sense of humor and the bizarre twists that go into his film are all *him*—inseparable from his special and subtle personality." Hitch had a flair for self-publicity (after all, he and Cecil B. DeMille were the first two directors whose names were well-known to audiences), but he never took himself or his work too seriously. When, during the filming of *Strangers on a Train*, a puzzled Farley Granger asked why Guy didn't just go to the police when Bruno murdered his wife, Hitch retorted: "You don't do that because if you *did*, we wouldn't have a movie."



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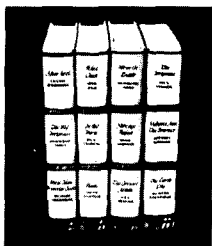
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